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MYSTERY

MAGAZINE



RUBY BEE'S

Ruby Bee's Bar and Grill

THE MAGGODY FILES: D.W.I.

Chief Arly
Hanks of
Maggody,
Arkansas,
Investigates

by Joan Hess

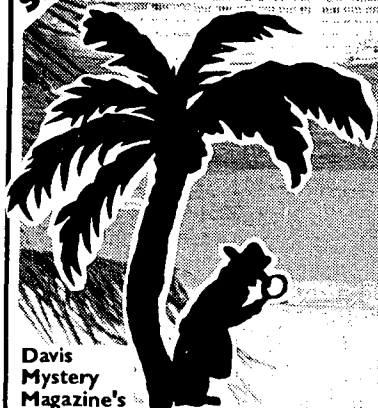
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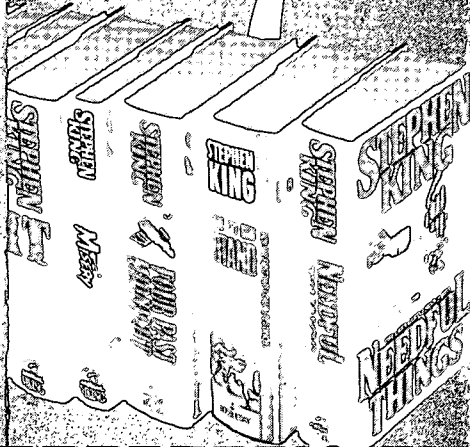
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 37, No. 3, March, 1992. Published every 28 days, which includes special issues in June and at year end, by Davis Publications, Inc., \$2.25 per copy in the U.S.A. \$2.95 in Canada. Annual subscription \$31.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$37.50 elsewhere (in Canada, GST is included) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10168-0035. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. © 1992 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3E1: Davis GST #R123293128.

ISSN: 0002-5224.

Cover by Suzanne Hughes Sullivan

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We have two new writers to welcome to AHMM in this issue, and two more to welcome back after a long absence.

Don Marshall, author of "A Friend in Deed," tells us that although this is not his first published short story, it is his first mystery story. He has also authored several books of non-fiction having to do with the sea. He is a retired twenty-year police officer who began writing, he says, when "one of my inventions blew up [and] put me in the hospital." Mr. Marshall was a Marine who fought at Iwo Jima in World War II, and he enlisted in the army during the Korean War. He has discovered a gold mine, studied archaeology and geology, done scuba diving, owned a bar,

dealt in government surplus, taught English as a second language, and received awards for his historical research. (Goodness!) His three book titles are *California Shipwrecks*, *Oregon Shipwrecks*, and *Straits of Juan de Fuca*. He and his wife live in Astoria, Oregon.

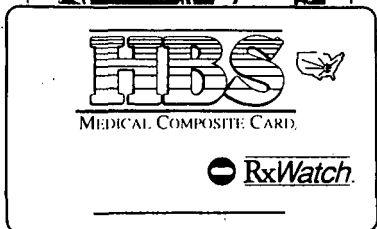
Judith L. Post, author of "The Pigeon," was enrolled by her husband in a writing class when diaper-changing got too much. Since then, she has published half a dozen short stories, several of them in the *Woman Sleuth* series of anthologies published by Crossing Press. She, her husband, and their two teenagers live in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Our returning authors are

(continued on page 42)

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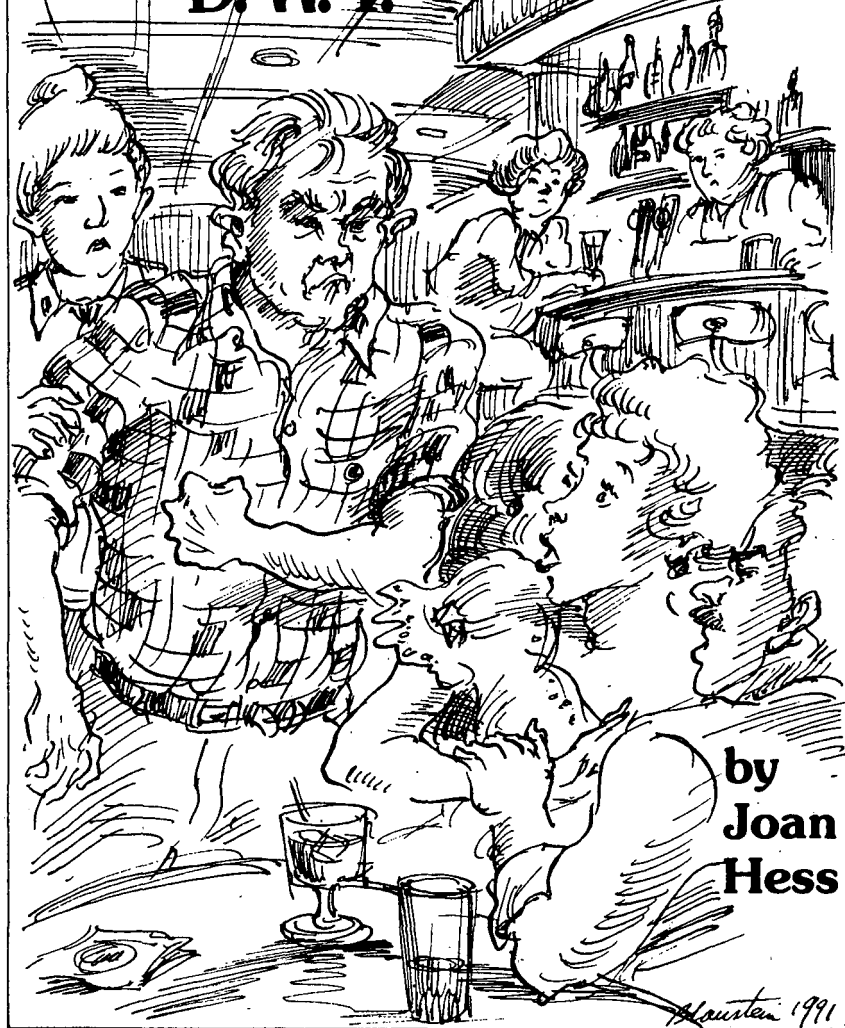
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FICTION

The Maggody Files: D.W.I.



by
**Joan
Hess**

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

6

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Thursdays aren't the busiest days for outbursts of criminal activity in Maggody, Arkansas (pop. 755). Neither are Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. Long about Friday, things pick up in anticipation of the weekend, although when we're talking grand theft auto, it means some teenager took off in his pa's pickup. A hit-and-run has to do with a baseball and a broken window at the Pot o' Gold trailer park. The perpetrator of larceny tends to be a harried mother who forgot to pay for gas at the convenience store, most likely because one of the toddlers in the back seat of the station wagon chose that moment to vomit copiously into the front seat.

I say all this with authority, because I, Ariel Hanks, am the chief of police, and it's my sworn duty to drag the errant driver home by his ear, and send the batter over to mumble a confession and offer to make reparation. Why, I've been known to go all the way out to Joyce Lambertino's house to have a diet soda and a slice of pound cake, admire her counted cross-stitch, and take her money to the Kwik-Stoppe-Shoppe. And bring her back the change.

Other than that, I occasionally run a speed trap out by the

skeletal remains of Purtle's Esso Station, where there's a nice patch of shade and some incurious cows. I swap dirty jokes with the sheriff's deputies when they drop by for coffee. Every now and then I wander around Cotter's Ridge, on the very obscure chance I might stumble across Raz Buchanon's moonshine still. It's up there somewhere, along with ticks, chiggers, mosquitoes, brambles, and nasty-tempered copperheads.

The rest of the time I devote to napping, reading, wondering why I'm back in Maggody, and doing whatever's necessary to eat three meals a day at Ruby Bee's Bar & Grill. The proprietor (a.k.a. my mother) is a worthy opponent, despite her chubby body and twinkly eyes. She's adjusted to having her daughter do what she considers a man's job, and she's resigned to my divorce and my avowed devotion to the single life. This is not to say I don't hear about my failings on a regular basis, both from her and her spindly, redhaired cohort, Estelle Op-pers, who runs a beauty shop in her living room—and is as eager as Ruby Bee is to run my life. But I don't believe in running; there's nothing wrong with a nice, easy walk (except on Cotter's Ridge, and that's already been mentioned).

But the particular Thursday under discussion turned ugly. I was at the PD, yanking open desk drawers to watch the roaches scurry for cover. When the telephone rang, I reluctantly shut the drawer and picked up the receiver.

"Sheriff Dorfer says to meet him by the creek out on County 103," the dispatcher said with her customary charm. "Right now."

"Shall I bring a bucket of bait and a six-pack?"

"Just git yourself over there, Arly. Sheriff Dorfer's at the scene, and he ain't gonna be all that tickled if you show up acting like you thought it was a picnic."

It was not a picnic. I parked behind several official vehicles, settled my sunglasses, and slithered and slipped down a fresh path of destruction to the edge of Boone Creek. Harve Dorfer was talking to a man in a torn army jacket who was wiping blood from his face with a wadded handkerchief. A pair of grim deputies watched. Beyond them lay a lumpish form covered by a blanket. The rear half of a truck stuck out of the water as if poised in a dive.

"You're a real work of art," Harve growled, then stalked over to me, an unlit cigar butt wedged in the corner of his mouth. He aimed a finger at

me, but turned and looked at his deputies. "Les, you and John Earl take this stinkin' drunk up to the road and have the medics check him. If nothing's broke, take him to the office and book him. If something is, go along with him and wait at the emergency room until he's patched up. Then take him to the office and throw the whole dadgum book at him."

I studied the object of Harve's displeasure. Red Gromwell was local, a young guy, maybe thirty, with a sly face already turning soft and greasy hair the color of a rotting orange. At the moment, he had a swollen lip, the beginnings of a black eye, and a ragged streak of blood down the side of his face. His knuckles were raw. His jacket was stained with blood, as were the baggy jeans that rode low on his hips out of deference to his beer gut. He gave me a foolish grin, dropped the handkerchief, and crumpled to the ground. The deputies hauled him to his feet, and the three began to climb toward the road.

"Drunker than a boiled owl," Harve said, firing up the cigar butt. "Says he and a guy named Buell Fumitory was out riding around, sharing a bottle and yucking it up. All of a sudden the truck's bouncing down the hill like one of those bumper

cars at the county fair. Says he was thrown out the window and landed way yonder in that clump of brush. Buell over there wasn't as lucky."

I folded my arms and tried to be a cool, detached cop. My eyes kept sneaking to the shrouded body on the ground, however, and I doubt Harve was fooled one whit. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was as dry as the dusty road behind us. "Did Buell drown?" I asked.

"I can't say right offhand. He was banged up pretty bad from hitting his face against the steering wheel who knows how many times. It doesn't much matter—in particular to him. Red said by the time he could git himself up and stagger to the edge of the water, it was clear there wasn't anything to do for Buell. He did manage to climb back to the road and flag down a truck driver who called us."

"Red's not the heroic sort," I said, shaking my head. "He'd just as soon run down a dog as bother to brake."

"You know him?"

"Yes indeed. He works at the body shop and brawls at the pool hall. I had some unpleasant encounters with him after his wife finally got fed up with him and filed for divorce. Twice I drove her to the women's shelter in Farberville and urged her to stay for a few days, but

she scooted right back and refused to file charges, so there wasn't much I could do."

"One of those, huh?" Harve said through a cloud of noxious cigar smoke.

"One of those." I again found myself staring at the blanket. "Buell Fumitory kept to himself, so I don't know much about him. He moved here . . . oh, a year ago, and worked at the supermarket. He came into Ruby Bee's every now and then for a beer. He seemed okay to me."

"According to this Red fellow, Buell was driving at the time of the accident. I reckon it's too late to give him a ticket." Harve snuffed out the cigar butt and looked over my shoulder. "Here come the boys with the body bag. Tell ya what, Arly," he said, putting his arm around me and escorting me up the hill, "I'm gonna let you have this one for your very own. I need Les and John Earl to finish up the paperwork on those burglaries over in Hasty, and I myself am gonna be busier than a stump-tailed cow in fly time with office chores."

I shrugged off his arm. "Like posing for the media with the latest haul of marijuana? This sudden activity doesn't have anything to do with the upcoming election, does it?"

"You just hunt up the next of

kin and write me a couple of pages of official blather," he said. Trying not to smirk, he left me at the road and went down to supervise the medics.

As I stood there berating myself for getting stuck so easily with nothing but tedious paperwork, a tow truck came down the road. Once the body and the truck were removed, the squirrels would venture back, as would the birds, the bugs, and the fish that lurked in the muddy creek. The splintered saplings would be replaced by a new crop. Three months from then, I told myself with a grimace, there would be nothing left to remind folks about the dangers of D.W.I. In some states, it's called other things. In Arkansas, we opt for the simple and descriptive Driving While Intoxicated. Might as well call it Dying While Intoxicated.

"It doesn't make a plugged nickel's worth of sense," Ruby Bee proclaimed from behind the bar. She rinsed off the glasses in the sink, wiped her hands on her apron, and gazed beadily at Estelle, who was drinking a beer and gobbling up pretzels like she was a paying customer.

"That sort of thing happens all the time," Estelle coun-

tered. "They were drunk, and anybody with a smidgen of the sense God gave a goose knows it's asking for trouble to go drinking and driving, particularly out on those twisty back roads. Remember that time I was coming back from a baby shower in Emmet, and this big ol' deer came scampering into the road, and I nearly—"

"Nobody said there was a deer involved. Lottie said that Elsie happened to hear Red talking to some fellow at the laundrette earlier this morning, and he said Buell was singing and howling like a tomcat and was a sight too far gone to keep his eyes or anything else on the road." She began to dry the glasses on a dishrag, all the while frowning and trying to figure out what was nagging at her. "The thing is," she added slowly, "I didn't think Buell was like that. He was always real nice when he worked in produce. One time I bought a watermelon, and when I cut—"

"I don't see why he couldn't have been real nice and also been willing to drink cheap whisky and take a drive."

"I ain't saying he wasn't," Ruby Bee said, still speaking slowly and getting more bumfuzzled by the minute. "But I'll tell you one thing, Estelle—he never came in here and guzzled down a couple of pitchers like

Red did. Like Red did before I threw him out on his skinny behind, that is. It like to cost me three hundred dollars to get the jukebox fixed. And to think he busted it just because his ex-wife was drinking a glass of beer with that tire salesman!"

"He was hotter than a fire in a pepper mill, wasn't he?" Estelle said as she picked up a pretzel. "I wish somebody'd find the gumption to mention to him that what his ex-wife does is none of his business. It ain't like he bought a wife; he was only renting one. It's a crying shame he wasn't the one to end up in the creek so Gayle can get on with her life and stop having to peek over her shoulder every time she steps out of the house."

"How'd she take the news?"

Estelle lowered her voice, although anybody could see there wasn't another soul in the barroom, much less hanging over her shoulder like a lapel. "Well, Lottie said Mrs. Jim Bob happened to run by Gayle's with some ironing, and Gayle wouldn't even come to the door. Mrs. Jim Bob saw the curtain twitch, so she knew perfectly well that Gayle was home at the time."

"I don't see that she has any reason to . . ."

Estelle gave her a pitying look. "To avoid Mrs. Jim Bob?

I'd say we all had darn good reasons to do that. I could make you a list as long as your arm."

"Unless, of course . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Well, if Gayle was . . ."

"I do believe you could finish a sentence, Mrs. Dribble Mouth, and do it before the sun sets in Bogart County."

Not bothering to respond, Ruby Bee stared at the jukebox with a deepening frown. "You know," she said about the time Estelle was preparing to make another remark, "the last time I saw Gayle at the Emporium, she was looking right frumpy. What she needs is a perm, Estelle, and you're the one to give it to her. I suspect it'll have to be for free; she barely makes minimum wage at the poultry plant in Starley City. Why doncha call her right now and make an appointment?"

"For free?" Estelle gasped. "Why in tarnation would I do a thing like that?"

Ruby Bee curled her finger, and this time she was the one to speak in a low, conspiratorial voice. Estelle managed not to butt in, and ten minutes later she was dialing Gayle Gromwell's telephone number.

The next morning I got the address of Buell Fumitory's rent house from the manager at

the supermarket. He told me that Buell had worked there for most of a year, caused no trouble, took no unauthorized days off, and got along with the other employees.

Armed with the above piercing insights, I drove out past Raz Buchanon's shack to an ordinary frame house in a scruffy yard. A rusty subcompact was parked beside the house, but no one answered my repeated knocks. I considered doing something clever with a skeleton key or a credit card to gain entry. However, having neither, I opened the front door and went inside.

The interior was as ordinary as the exterior. It was clearly a bachelor's domain. There were a few dirty ashtrays and a beer can on the coffee table, odds and ends of food in the refrigerator, chipped dishes and a cracked cup in the cabinets. The only anomaly was a vase with a handful of wilted daisies, but even tomato stackers can have a romantic streak.

I continued on my merry way. The bedroom was small and cluttered, but no more so than my apartment usually was. The closet contained basic clothing and fishing equipment. The drawer in the bedside table had gum wrappers, nail clippers, a long overdue electric bill, and an impressive

selection of condom packets. Perhaps somebody in the morgue would encourage Buell to continue practicing safe sex in the netherworld.

In the distance, most likely at Raz's place, a dog began to bark dispiritedly. As if in response, the house creaked and sighed. It wasn't a mausoleum, and I wasn't about to lapse into a gothic thing involving involuntary shivers and a compulsion to clutch my bosom and flutter my eyelashes. On the other hand, I recalled the blanketed body alongside the creek, and I wasted no time, pawing through dresser drawers until I found a stack of letters and an address book.

I sat down on the bed and flipped through the latter until I found the listing for Aunt Pearl in Boise. If she was not the official next of kin, she would know who was. The letters turned out to be commercial greeting cards, all signed with a smiley face. I made a frowny face, stuffed them back in the drawer, and returned to the PD to see if Aunt Pearl might be sitting by her telephone in Boise.

She was, but she was also hard of hearing and very old. Once I'd conveyed the news, she admitted she was the only living relative. Her financial situation precluded funeral ar-

rangements. I assured her that we would deal with it, hung up, and leaned back in my chair to ponder how best to share this with Harve. There was very little of value at Buell's house. A small television, furniture that would go to the Salvation Army (if they'd take it), and a couple of boxes of personal effects. The pitiful car would bring no more than a hundred dollars.

The pitiful car. I propped my feet on the corner of the desk and tried to figure out why there was a car, pitiful or not, parked at Buell's house. He did not seem like a two-car family. Glumly noting that the water stain on the ceiling had expanded since last I'd studied it, I called the manager at the supermarket and asked him what Buell had driven. He grumbled but agreed to ask the employees, and came back with a description of the subcompact.

Red Gromwell drove an ancient Mustang; I'd pulled him over so many times that I knew the license plate by heart. The pickup truck in the creek had been gray, or white and dirty. I thought this over for a while (bear in mind it was Friday morning, so I wasn't preparing to foil bank robberies or negotiate with kidnappers).

I called the sheriff's department and got Harve on the line.

"You're not backing out on

that D.W.I. report, are you?" he asked before I could get out a word. "I hate to stick you with it, Arly, but I'm up to my neck in some tricky figures for the upcoming quorum meeting, and one of the county judges says—"

"What'd you do with Red Gromwell?"

There was a lengthy silence. At last Harve exhaled and said, "Nothing much, damn it. We kept him in the drunk tank for twelve hours. This morning he called his cousin for bail money and strolled out like a preacher on his way to count the offering. I checked with the county prosecutor, but it ain't worth bothering with. If he'd been driving, we could cause him some grief. Not that much, though. Get his driver's license suspended, slap him with a fat fine. The judge'd lecture him for twenty minutes, and maybe give him some probation. The prisons are stuffed to the gills right now, and I sure don't need to offer the likes of Red Gromwell room and board, courtesy of Stump County."

I waited until he stopped sighing, then asked him to ascertain the ownership of the truck that had been pulled out of Boone Creek. He huffed and puffed some more while I wondered how badly the PD roof was leaking and finally agreed

to have Les call the tow shop (sigh), get the truck's plate number (siigh), and call the state office (siiigh) to see who all was named on the registration.

On that breezy note, we parted. I did some noisy exhaling of my own, but all it accomplished was to make me woozy. It occurred to me that I was in need of both local gossip and a blue plate special, so I abandoned any pretense of diligent detection and walked down the road to Ruby Bee's Bar & Grill, the hot spot for food and fiction.

It was closed. Irritated, I went back to my car, drove to the Dairee Dee-Lishus where the food was less palatable but decidedly better than nothing, and promised myself a quiet picnic out by the rubble of the gas station. Twenty minutes later, I was turning down County 103.

“I t'd be cute all curly around your face,” Ruby Bee said brightly. “Brush those bangs out of your eyes and wear a little makeup, and you'd look just like a homecoming queen.”

“I don't know,” Gayle Gromwell said. She didn't sound like she did, either. She sounded more like she was real sorry about coming to Estelle's Hair

Fantasies, even if the perm was free. Nobody'd said the event was open to the public.

Estelle nudged Ruby Bee out of the way. “I happen to be professionally trained in these matters,” she said with a pinched frown. “Now, Gayle honey, I have to agree that those bangs make you look like a dog that came out of the rain a day late. I'm just going to snip a bit here and there, give you some nice, soft curls, and then we'll see if maybe you don't want an auburn rinse.”

Gayle looked a little pouty, but this wasn't surprising, since she wasn't much older than twenty and still had a few blemishes and the faint vestiges of baby fat. She slouched in the chair and gazed blackly at her image in the mirror, refusing to meet Estelle's inquisitive eyes or even Ruby Bee's penetrating stare. “Oh, go ahead and do whatever you want. I know my hair looks awful, but I don't care. Why don't you shave it off?”

“It's going to be real pretty,” Estelle said nervously. This wasn't what she and Ruby Bee had hoped for, although Gayle had come and that was the first hurdle. She wiggled her eyebrows at Ruby Bee. “Don't you think Gayle here will have every boy in town chasing after her?”

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Ruby Bee knew a cue when she heard one. "I just hope Red's simmered down. Remember when he put his fist through the jukebox because of that tire salesman? They charged me three hundred dollars."

They both looked at Gayle, wondering what she'd say. Her eyes were closed, but as they watched, a tear squeezed out and slunk down her cheek alongside her nose. Within the hour, they had the whole teary, hiccuppy, disjointed story.

"Two weeks ago?" I echoed, admittedly less than brilliantly. "The truck was purchased two weeks ago?"

"A private sale," Les continued. "I tracked down the previous owner, who said he'd advertised the damn thing for three weeks running and was about to sell it for scrap when some guy showed up with a hundred bucks."

"Some guy? What did he look like?"

"Nothing special. Dark hair, wearing jeans and a work shirt, sunglasses, cap. Average height and weight, no initials carved in his forehead or neon antlers or anything."

"And he didn't catch the guy's name, I suppose?"

"You suppose right. This was strictly cash-and-carry."

I tried once more. "What about the registration papers?"

"Never transferred."

I hung up and went to the back room of the PD to glower at my evidence. It didn't take long. The bloodstained handkerchief was in one plastic bag and an empty liter whisky bottle in another. I hadn't been in the mood to take scrapings of mud from the bank or water from the creek. Harve, the deputies, the medics, and the tow truck operator had all tromped around; if there had been a telltale footprint, it had been obliterated (and I couldn't imagine a footprint telling much of a tale, anyway).

There was no point in dusting the bottle for fingerprints. If I bothered, and then found Red and took his to compare, I'd have a lovely match. It was a policeish activity, but also a futile one. As for the handkerchief, I knew where the blood came from and I didn't care where the handkerchief did.

And I knew where the truck came from, but I didn't know who had bought it or why. I realized I again was making a frowny face. This was of no significance, but it led my thoughts back to the smiley faces on the cards, and that led me to the contents of the bed-

side drawer, the daisies, the white pickup truck, and before too long I was staring at the whisky bottle and wondering how I could prove Red Gromwell had murdered Buell Fumitory—soberly and in cold blood.

Then I realized I had the evidence in front of me. I went back to the telephone, called Les, and said, "Do you have a date tonight?"

"I don't think my wife will approve, but what do you have in mind?"

"**W**hat happened to Gayle's hair?" I said to Ruby Bee as I watched Gayle and Les settle in a back booth. "Didn't her mother warn her about sticking a fork in a socket?"

Ruby Bee leaned across the bar and whispered, "This ain't the time for smart remarks. I don't seem to recollect anyone complimenting you on that schoolmarm hair of yours. I happen to have something that you might find interestin', if you can shut your mouth long enough to hear it."

I meekly shut my mouth, mostly because I might have time to eat a piece of pie before the fireworks started. Before I could hear the big news, Estelle perched on the bar stool next

to me, craned her head around until she spotted Gayle, and then turned back with a self-righteous smile. "I just knew that auburn rinse would be perfect. If Arly here would let me restyle her hair, she'd look just as nice as Gayle."

"So that's why I had to eat at the Dee-Lishus today," I said accusingly. I resisted the urge to run my fingers through my hair, which would have undone my bun and left me vulnerable to further cosmetological attacks. "Just once I wish you two would stay off the case. Believe it or not, I am more than capable of—"

"Gayle was having an affair with Buell," Ruby Bee said.

I did not relent. "I figured as much, and I did it all by myself. I did not require the assistance of two overgrown Nancy Drews to—"

"And Red found out," Estelle said. "Last week he busted in on 'em and made all kinds of nasty threats. I find that a mite suspicious, considering what happened last evening." She blinked at Ruby Bee, not blankly but frostily. "If Arly already knew about Gayle and Buell, why did I end up doing her perm for free?"

Ruby Bee retreated until she bumped into the beer tap. "Arly doesn't know everything. Just ask her if she knows that Buell

didn't like to go carousing like some, and hardly ever got drunk on account of the medication he took for a recurring bladder problem. And wouldn't have gone riding around with Red if his life depended on it."

"Don't ask me anything," I rumbled. I was about to elaborate on my irritation when I spotted Red coming across the dance floor. He still looked a bit battered, the black eye having blossomed and the swollen lip giving him a petulant sneer. He was not wearing blood-stained clothing, however, and he moved easily for someone reputedly thrown fifty feet from a careening vehicle.

He froze in the middle of the floor, ignoring the couples cruising around him. His fingers curled into fists, and a muscle in his neck bulged like a piece of rope. Clearly, the first of the bottle rockets was lit. I slid off the stool and caught up with him as he reached the booth where Gayle and Les were sitting.

"What the hell did you do to your hair?" he asked Gayle. When she shrugged, he jabbed his thumb at Les.

"Who's this?"

She looked up defiantly. "None of your business, Red. We've been divorced for two years now, and you ain't got any right to act like a crybaby

if I go out with someone."

"I didn't act like a crybaby when I caught you in bed with that wimp from the supermarket, did I?" he said, looming over her. "Guess you won't be romping with him any more, unless you aim to crawl in the casket with him."

Les put down his beer. "Now, wait just a minute, buddy. This woman doesn't have to take that kind of talk from—"

"Shut up or I'll shove that glass down your throat," Red snarled. "Now, listen up, Gayle Gromwell. You git yourself out of that booth and on your way home afore I drag this mama's boy outside to rearrange his pretty little face."

"You can't tell me what to do," she said sulkily.

Red pulled back his hand to slap her, but I grabbed his arm and hung on until he relaxed. "Gayle's right, Red—you can't tell her what to do," I said. "She's a single woman, and she's allowed to date whomever she chooses. In this case, she's chosen to date a deputy sheriff, which means you're threatening an officer of the law. In front of an entire roomful of witnesses, too."

He realized all the customers were watching and, from their expressions, enjoying the scene. Ruby Bee thoughtfully had unplugged the jukebox so

nobody would miss a word.

"Okay," he muttered to me, then stared at Gayle. "You keep in mind what I said to you the other night, you hear?"

I tapped him on the shoulder. "Was this when you invited your old pal Buell to share a bottle of whisky and enjoy the moonlight?"

"Naw, that was yesterday after work. I went by his house to tell him I was wrong to bust down the door like I did. I told him that sometimes I go kind of crazy when I think about Gayle with another man. He was right understanding, and pretty soon we decided to run into Farberville and get ourselves a bottle. We was talking about deer season when he lost control of the truck. You know what happened then."

"Yes, I do," I said, nodding. "Why was Buell driving the truck you bought in Little Rock two weeks ago? You paid good money for it, and I'm surprised you weren't driving."

The bruises under his eye stayed dark, but the rest of his face paled. "I dunno. I thought he was soberer than me."

"It's a good thing you weren't in the Mustang, isn't it?" I continued, still pretending we were having a polite conversation. "I know you're awfully fond of it."

"Helluva car," he said.

"Which is why you bought the truck. You weren't about to total your Mustang that way. I checked around town today, and nobody saw you and Buell driving down the road in the white pickup." I crossed my fingers. "But Raz saw you drive by his place in the Mustang late afternoon, and come back by. He didn't see Buell then, but I guess he'd need X-ray vision to see a body in the trunk, wouldn't he?"

"What are you saying?" Gayle said, gulping. "Did he kill Buell?"

"I already told the sheriff all about it," Red muttered.

I shook my head. "You told the sheriff a stale old fairy tale, Red. You went to Buell's and beat him up, put him in the trunk, and drove to your place to switch vehicles. Then you collected the whisky, went out to the hill on County 103, and sent Buell down the hill and into the creek. He was unconscious, so he didn't have much of a chance to get out of the truck."

He gave me a frightened look. "You got any proof, cop lady?"

"You drained the bottle after the wreck, so we'd figure you were drunk. I found it in the woods. If you had it with you in the truck, then you and it went flying out the window together.

Why didn't it break?"

"That doesn't prove anything."

"You'd better hope Buell's fingerprints are on it," I said, "and that the alcohol level in his blood indicates he was drunk." I waited politely, but he didn't seem to have much to say. "Oh, yes, and there's one more thing, Red. You'd better start praying the blood on that handkerchief matches your type and doesn't have any traces of the medication Buell was taking."

"Medication?" Red said, sounding as if he were in need of some at the moment. He didn't improve when Les stood up, recited the Miranda warning, and cuffed him.

Once they were gone, I glowered at Ruby Bee until she headed for the jukebox, then sat down across from Gayle. "Red'll be out on bail by Monday. I suggest you spend the

weekend thinking about why you're willing to play the role of victim. Get some counseling at the women's shelter if it'll help, and change the lock on your front door."

Her smile was dreamy. "Who'd have thought Red would actually kill somebody over me?"

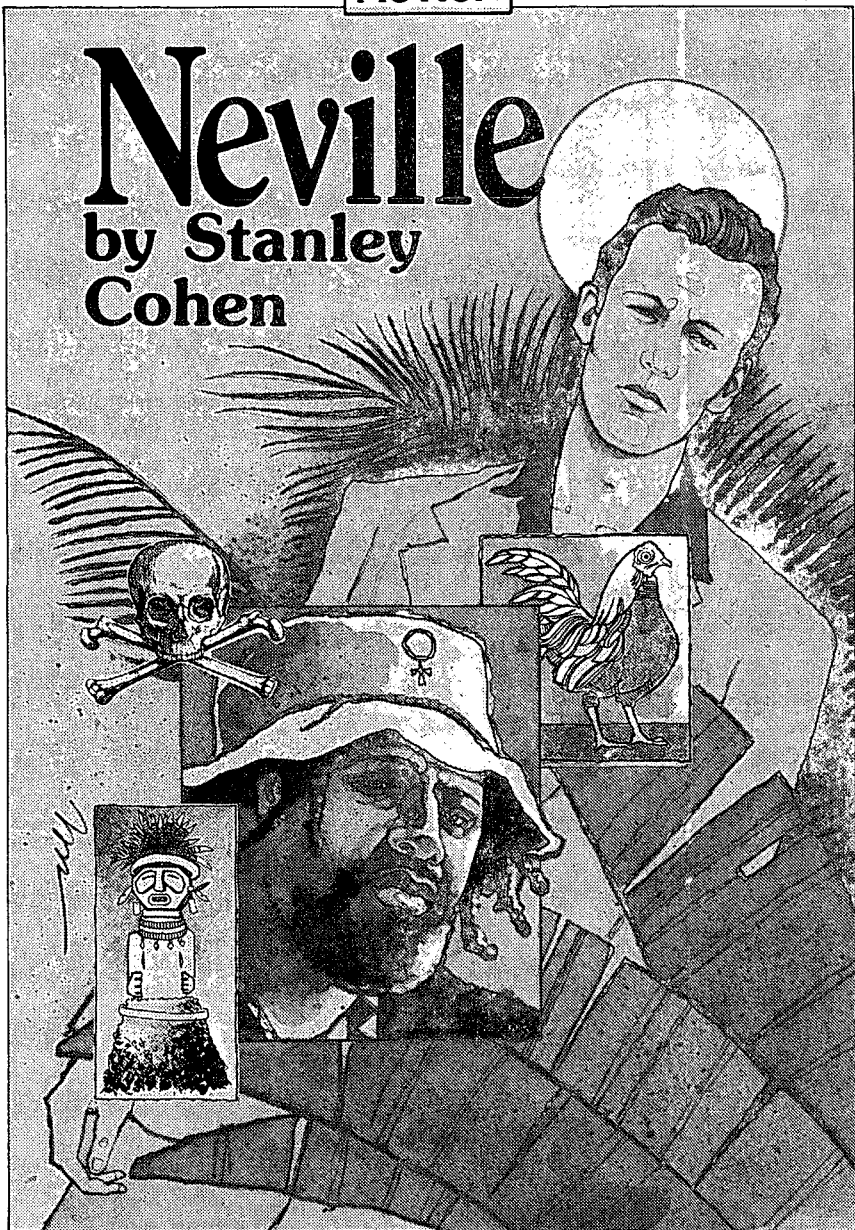
"One of these days he'll kill you," I said, then left her to her pathetic fantasies and went back to the PD to brood.

During the course of the weekend, I'd be obliged to run in some drunks, bust a couple of minors in possession, and intervene in domestic disputes. With luck, we'd all survive, and on Monday morning, bright and early, I'd grab my radar gun and a good book, and head for that patch of shade . . . unless I decided to take a hike on Cotter's Ridge. You just never know where crime will erupt in Maggody, Arkansas (pop. 755).

FICTION

Neville

by Stanley
Cohen



My mind was totally preoccupied the day I met him. I had been dealing with a particularly disabling case of writer's procrastination and had resolutely decided that I had to get something started. And being in Jamaica, where I'd spent so many winter months over the years, I'd also decided to have the action take place there and even include an element of the voodoo allegedly indigenous to the island.

I had driven into Port Antonio to walk around the farmers' market and replenish our supply of fresh fruit when I first saw him. Something about him made him appear a little different from most of the other Jamaicans that crowded the narrow streets and sidewalks. Perhaps it was his coloring, which was a shade lighter than the typical Jamaican, or maybe it was his bright red attire, the grossly oversized red cap, the red pants, and the matching red shirt imprinted with a vague design that resembled script but was not easily read.

Something else about him came across as different when he approached me. His speech was articulate and free of the patois of the average Jamaican. "Pardon me," he said, "but do you think you could help me with getting some transporta-

tion into Kingston? I want to go and visit some friends there. They have invited me, you see."

"Sorry," I answered. "I'm not going to Kingston anytime soon." I continued walking on my way. Did he really expect a total stranger to take him to Kingston?

He looked away as if considering turning elsewhere for help, for greener pastures. I was obviously offering him no encouragement. Then he took several quick steps to catch up with me. "You can still help me," he said with a broad smile. His teeth were brilliantly white and flawless.

"How?" I asked.

"It is not my usual practice to ask for money," he said, "but—"

"Then don't," I said, cutting him off. This disappointed me. I didn't expect it of him, somehow.

"But economic conditions are not good here in Port Antonio," he continued, ignoring my interruption. "There is no work, and I must get to Kingston to see my friends who have invited me, and there are buses if I had the fare—"

"Look," I said, pausing to confront him, "I'm afraid I can't help you." But as I said it, looking into his disarming smile, I too smiled, and he knew he had at least a toehold.

"Maybe you need something, mon," he said. "Tell me, what do you need? I can probably get it for you." His teeth were truly spectacular, the kind that show up in toothpaste ads. His thin mustache was carefully trimmed, and with his giant cap thrown back, he was a charmer. He was slimly built and appeared to be in his early twenties.

"I need fruit," I said. "I'm going over to the market to buy fruit."

"The fruit is very good in Jamaica," he said. "The best in the world." And with that he made a world-sized gesture. "Mango season is almost here. Jamaican mangoes are sweet as honey."

"Yes, I know."

By this time I had stopped walking and had turned to face him.

"Fruit you can find in the market. Surely you need something else which Neville can get for you."

"Who's Neville?"

"I am Neville."

"You're Neville? Neville who?"

"Neville Churchill."

"Neville Churchill?" This made me really grin at him. "Why not Neville Chamberlain? Or Winston Churchill?"

He grinned right back, making me wish I could trade teeth

with him. "Why not Neville Washington?" he said. "Or Neville Reagan? Because it is Neville Churchill. You see? What can I get you, mon? What do you need?"

"All I need at the moment is some fruit."

"How about some ganja? Jamaica's best, mon. I can get it for you. Cheap."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"Would you like to go rafting? I can arrange it special."

"I've been."

"Then what do you need, mon? You name it. Everyone needs something."

"You're right. Everyone does need something. And that does include me. Okay. What I need is some very special information."

"What kind of information, mon?"

"I'm a writer. I write mystery stuff. Do you know what I'm talking about? And I want to write a story that takes place here in Jamaica. And in order to write my story, I need to know all about Jamaican voodoo practices. Can you help me with that?"

The smile left his face. "Voodoo? You want to know about Jamaican voodoo? What makes you think there is voodoo here?"

"I've heard there is. And I want to know about it. In fact,

I want to see it in action. Can you help me?"

"Are you not well? Do you want to see the obeah man for a cure?"

"I'm fine. I want to learn about the other side of it. The evil side."

He looked a little unnerved for the first time. "You're talking something else now, mon. That part of obeah, that is dangerous business to try and find out too much about."

I drew my money clip from my pocket and pulled a Jamaican ten dollar bill from it. "You interested or not?"

"For that? You expect me to teach you all about the obeah man for that? Mon, the exchange rate is nearly six dollars to one. That is barely worth two dollars U.S."

I peeled off a couple of twenties and held out all three bills to him. "How's this?"

"Not enough. Not for what you ask."

I added three more twenties. "Okay?" He shook his head.

I pulled a fifty from inside and added that. "This is it," I said with finality. "You interested or not?"

He took the money. "Where can I find you?" he asked.

"Do you know the San San area?"

"Of course." He was practically insulted by the question.

"The road down to the Blue Hole?"

"Of course," he said.

"The second house? Silver Cove?"

"Of course." Then he said, "San San is a most beautiful area. Many famous people have lived there. Errol Flynn? The Aga Khan? Many famous writers, as well. Do you know Joshua Moore?"

"I've met him," I said.

He carefully tucked the folded bills into the pocket of his tight red pants. "I'll be in touch with you," he said. And for the first time I deciphered the message imprinted in the obscure script letters on his red shirt. "Life is but a mirror image." And directly beneath this line, the mirror image of the line. He turned and walked away, adjusting his big red cap.

It was early evening of that same day at one of those typically San San cocktail parties that I next saw Neville. The party was in one of the gracious homes set into the steep green hillside looking down on San San Bay. Many of the noteworthy denizens of the San San area were there, including rich Britons and Americans who were enjoying the season in their winter homes, the wealthier of the local businesspeople, a few political figures out from

Kingston for the weekend, a sculptor, an artist, and the managers of several of the resort hotels in the vicinity. Liquor was flowing, talk was mostly glib and superficial, and several tables laden with finger food were being ravaged.

Most of the activity was outside the house on a spacious verandah in the deliciously warm tropical night air. The verandah afforded a truly stunning view of the steep terrain leading down to the sea. The San San area is a rain forest, and the downward slope was virtually choking with varied tropical growth, dotted here and there with a house and its lights.

I had made my way to a table of food and begun eating a beef patty, wishing I had a drink, when I saw Neville. He wore the black pants, white shirt, and black bow tie of a houseboy, and he was carrying a tray, serving drinks. He looked a little surprised on seeing me but quickly recovered.

"I see you found some work," I said to him. "I thought you'd be in Kingston by now."

He signaled with his eyes to quit speaking as if I knew him. "What would you like to drink, sir?" he asked.

"A scotch with lots of soda."

"Very good, sir." Then fur-
tively, "I'll come and see you."

I continued eating, mostly the delicious Jamaican beef patties, a few stuffed eggs, bits of barbecued chicken, and the like, and sipping the drink Neville had brought me. My wife was in the living room, making conversation with a group of women, and as I moved about the table on the verandah, I suddenly found myself in the presence of a heated discussion between two of San San's most familiar individuals. The subject was the perennial question of bringing gambling to the island, particularly to the Port Antonio area.

"It will destroy life as we presently know it on this island. Can't you get that through your bloody skull?" Cedric Evans was a wealthy Englishman with a large winter home in San San.

"On the contrary, it will have the opposite effect. It will bring prosperity. It will create an influx of tourism and a great number of new jobs for the local populace." Hanford Gibbons was a Jamaican, a tall, burly man with light brown skin and a mustache. He owned the principal supermarket in Port Antonio and was also a major landowner in the area.

"We'll be overrun," Evans said. He was a puffy middle-aged man with flowing white hair and a very pink face that

grew pinker when he drank or became agitated. "What we can look forward to is an influx of organized crime."

"The economy of this area is one of abject poverty. Increased tourism is Jamaica's best hope of economic survival." Gibbons was from the educated minority of the islands. His diction was precise and careful. As large as he was, his presence was intimidating.

But Evans stood his ground, becoming pinker as his emotions grew in intensity. He'd had a bit to drink. "We have something lovely here in this remote spot. Bring in gambling, and we'll soon have a bloody strip. Another Vegas. Let them have it in Montego Bay, but keep it out of here."

"This area needs it *more* than Montego Bay. There's more unemployment *here*," Gibbons stated with quiet, overbearing intensity.

"Oh, Lord," Evans said, "next we'll have a jetport, and high-rise hotels as far as the eye can see."

"Would that be so bad? If there were no shortage of jobs?"

"And could it be that you'd like to sell some of your shore-front holdings for some of those hotels?"

Gibbons' face grew dark and brooding for a moment. Then, in a severely quiet manner, "Do

I take it that you condemn the honest practice of business? Tell us, how do you afford to live in London and spend your winters here if you're opposed to making money?"

"I don't earn my keep by destroying something beautiful," Evans said.

Then, in a plaintive tone, "Come now, you don't really want them here, do you? The mobsters? And the tourists by the thousands?"

I'd heard it all before. The endless debate. Saving Jamaica by legalized gambling, and the many side effects it might have. The scarf at Evans' throat caught my eye. It was a fragile silk crepe thing, a bright shade of red-orange, streaked with abstract lines of even brighter yellow. It was typical of Evans' "island attire." It went perfectly with his spotless white suit with the pearl buttons and the Flair-collared, sky blue shirt. Back in London, he probably dressed in banker's grays.

"As a landowner and member of the Association," Gibbons said to Evans, speaking as if he was trying to put Evans straight with a final comment, "you may ultimately have a vote on this issue. I hope you don't plan to use it to perpetuate the poverty around here."

"I think you know bloody

well how I'd vote," Evans answered.

"I'm most sorry to hear that," Gibbons said, looking away.

Neville reappeared, carrying a tray of drinks. I took mine and returned to the table that held the beef patties.

A week went by. I was sitting on the patio at Silver Cove, holding my pencil and blank pad and gazing out to sea, when Neville came bounding down the steps from the road, wearing his all red outfit including the giant cap. I had no idea by what mode of transportation he'd gotten there. He just seemed to materialize.

"You putting words on paper, mon?" he asked, flashing his brilliant smile.

"I'm waiting for an inspiration," I answered, showing him the empty page. "One that you were paid to arrange for me."

"You shall get it tonight, mon," he said. "If you are ready for it."

"You mean the obeah man?"

"I got the word from my sources that he will perform a ritual at his secret temple at midnight tonight."

"I'd like to witness that."

"I can take you there. I will come here at ten thirty. Do you have a car?"

"Yes."

"And do you have a thousand Jamaican?"

"For what?"

"For Neville, mon. For me."

"I already gave you over a hundred and fifty."

"I'll credit that against the thousand. What you are asking for is not without risk, mon."

"You're a thief, Neville," I said with a smile.

"No, mon. I'm a businessman." He glanced around him at the elegance of Silver Cove. "As the risk increases, so does the price."

"Okay, okay. You'll have the money."

"And wear dark clothes, mon. Pants, not shorts. And a shirt with long sleeves. All dark. And shoes in which you can run very fast."

"Hey! Where the hell are you taking me?"

"You want to see the obeah man? He does not do obeah on busy street corners, mon."

"Are you going to get me killed?"

"It is not without some bit of risk, mon. I told you that." Neville paused. "I think I can bring you back safely, but it pays to be properly dressed for any emergency." He paused again. "You still interested?"

"I'll see you tonight."

"You'll have the money?"

"I'll have the money."

"Could you also have a bite

of food for me? Something good. Tell Isilda it is for me. She will know what to fix." And then he smiled his handsome smile.

Isilda was our cook. He obviously knew the territory.

I mentioned to my wife at dinner the plans I had made for late evening. Without thinking, I included the part about the dark clothes and the running shoes. I described it simply as an opportunity to observe a native religious ceremony.

She stared at me. "Have you completely separated yourself from your sanity?"

"Probably."

"For God's sake, when he shows up, tell him you've changed your mind. Tell him to go himself and come back and tell you about it."

"I'm going," I said. And then I turned away from her, ignoring the look of total disbelief on her face.

Neville arrived on time, and again I had no idea how he had gotten there. After Isilda fed him a meal that appeared to be mostly red beans and rice, we left. We drove through Port Antonio and continued along the shore road until Neville had me turn left on a very narrow, winding, unpaved road leading upward, into the dense brush.

"I trust you know where the hell we're going," I commented.

"You can be sure of it," he answered.

The road grew gradually worse, becoming deeply rutted and quite grown over. I wondered what damage the small rented car was going to suffer as we thumped and bounced in and out of holes and over the tenacious undergrowth. "I don't like the looks of this," I remarked, finally. "We're in the wrong kind of car for this."

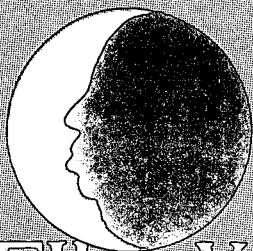
"We will soon be where we are going," he said. And finally he said, "Let us leave the car here. Turn it around so we will be headed back."

"Turn it around where? There's no room to drive, much less turn around."

"Pull right in there," he said, pointing, "and back around. You will do fine."

I followed his directions and felt certain we'd damaged the car in some way. We got out of it to find we'd missed a ditch by inches, one deep enough to have totally disabled the car. But we'd missed it.

We began making our way through the underbrush with Neville leading. The night was clear and the moon brilliantly full and visibility was quite good, but the thick foliage was difficult. I began to feel I should have listened to my wife, but



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was pulled ahead by what I hoped to get to see.

It seemed we had gone quite a distance on foot, maybe close to a quarter mile, when Neville stopped me and pointed ahead. "There," he said.

I saw what he was pointing at, which included several men gathered in a small clearing. I also made out the flames on a cluster of maybe eight to ten candles, and there was a small source of fire near the ground. "Let's get closer," I said.

"We must be careful," he responded.

"I can't see what the hell is happening. This is what I came to see, and I want to see it."

"Careful," Neville said, cautiously leading me closer. He went a few feet at a time, picking objects to use for blind.

"Let's move up to right over there," I whispered, pointing at a clump of greenery quite near the action.

"It's too close," he whispered back.

"No, it's not," I said. "They're not giving a thought to anyone's being out here. It'll be okay." I immediately stood up and moved in that direction.

"Wait," he said. "Follow me." He caught up with me and led me in a slightly less direct path toward the spot I'd indicated, moving a careful step at a time in a crouched stance.

When we reached the spot I had picked, we were within fifty yards or less of the scene and could see quite well. Four men stood under a kind of crude canopy supported on four bamboo poles and held taut by ropes from its corners to stakes in the ground. A small table in the middle held an array of short candles. On the ground next to the table stood a dark receptacle containing a fire.

One of the men, apparently the obeah man, was lean, gaunt, and stoop-shouldered. He was dressed in a priestly white full-length robe, trimmed in bright colors. His grayish hair was in long braids, dreadlocks, and as he held his hands above the candles, he was chanting some sort of incantation, a barely audible sound from where we were crouched. His dark-skinned face gleamed in the reflected candlelight.

Two of the others in the group were typical Rastafarians. They wore suntan-colored pants and no shirts. They were tall and very black with shiny, muscular bodies, and they too had masses of coarse hair braided into unkempt dreadlocks. Each held a serious-looking machete in one hand.

The fourth man was large and stout and lighter in color.

He even looked familiar. He was dressed conservatively in slacks and a shirt and was apparently the client, having come to the obeah man for some purpose. As we watched, he pulled a brightly colored cloth object from his pocket. This, too, looked strangely familiar.

Suddenly, all the pieces fell into place, and my breath caught in my throat. The client was Hanford Gibbons. And the bright cloth object he'd produced was Cedric Evans' scarf. It was the one Evans had been wearing the night of the cocktail party where I'd watched them argue about bringing gambling to the area.

Gibbons held the scarf by two corners and waved it back and forth as the obeah man continued his incantations over the candles. The two bare-chested Rastas stood in stoic, almost bored silence as they watched. I focused my attention on the scarf. Bright orange, streaked with yellow. Visibility was good enough to be almost certain. Yes! It had to be Evans' scarf.

The priest motioned to one of the Rastas.

"Now, watch," Neville whispered.

The Rasta laid his machete aside and, kneeling down, reached into what appeared to be a heavy burlap bag. He drew

out a live chicken by the throat. Then, still kneeling, he gripped the chicken's neck in both hands and stretched it flat on the small table near the candles. The other Rasta raised his machete, held it poised for a moment, and then brought it down with a heavy thud on the table. The Rasta holding the chicken stood up, his arms raised, the head in one hand, the rest of the wildly thrashing, headless chicken in the other.

The chicken slipped from his clutch and fell to the ground, where it flopped about. As the Rasta reached for it, it flopped away from him, almost as if sensing the presence of his grasping hand. He grabbed again and again, but the chicken stayed just beyond his reach. He finally turned and hurled the chicken's head into the darkness and then pounced on the flopping chicken with both hands, bringing it back to the table.

The obeah mán took Evans' scarf from Gibbons and held it high over the fire. The Rasta held the chicken, now still, over the orange scarf, bloody neck down, allowing blood to drip onto the scarf. The obeah man resumed his strange noises, looking skyward, his voice raised slightly. After a few moments, he released the blood-spattered scarf, allowing it to

fall into the fire. Then he dropped his arms to his sides and bowed his head in silence.

"I know whose scarf that was," I whispered to Neville.

"Yes, mon?"

"Yes. Is this obeah business really supposed to do anything?"

"Would you like me to take him your shirt?" Neville asked.

I thought about the question only for a moment because on moving my foot to shift my weight I stepped into a small hole and turned my ankle sharply, enough to make me yelp in pain before I realized what I'd done.

Neville reached out and grabbed me. "Mon?" he whispered.

We both looked up. They had heard me and were staring into the darkness in our direction. The two Rastas, machetes in hand, took a step toward us, then another. I was suddenly possessed by total panic and, in spite of the pain, began moving in the general direction of the parked car.

"Mon!" Neville said in a hoarse whisper. Since I'd given him little choice, he followed. "This way, mon," he said. "Follow me. You're going wrong. And run!" He angled away in a slightly different direction, and I followed his lead, running despite my ankle.

I looked back and saw that the two Rastas were following us. We had a substantial lead, but they were powerful men, much younger than I, in much better condition, and much more accustomed to running through the tropical underbrush. Then I tripped and stumbled to the ground.

Neville stopped, came back, grabbed my outstretched hand, and pulled me to my feet. When he did, I sensed a wetness in our gripped hands, something more than sweat. But he began running again, and I plunged after him. The Rastas were gaining ground.

As we reached the car and climbed into it, I discovered that my hand was bleeding heavily. I'd cut it on something when I fell. I jammed my bloodied hand into my pocket and fumbled for the key. The Rastas were getting close.

The car started and I shoved it into gear, causing it to lurch forward. And just in time. One of the Rastas threw his machete at the car and I heard it hit with a thunk. I accelerated, bumping along the rutted little path, and we got out of there.

After we were safely away from them and nearly back to the main road, Neville asked if, having almost gotten his head cut off, I was satisfied with what I'd seen. I assured him, as

I looked for something on which to wipe my hand, that I'd found the little excursion most interesting.

"Very good then, mon," he said, "I'd like the rest of the money."

I chose not to tell my wife all the details of the trip. I played the whole thing down and did not mention Gibbons' presence or Cedric Evans' scarf or the chase. I told her I got the cut hand when I accidentally slipped and fell. The cut required several stitches the next morning at the emergency room of the small hospital in Port Antonio. The wound would make it impossible to write for a few days.

Later this afternoon I was nothing less than stunned when Hanford Gibbons came walking down the steps into the patio at Silver Cove.

"I just happened by to see how you're getting along and how your hand is mending," he said with studied casualness. His presence was always rather imposing, and I was startled on seeing him because although I'd met him at many social functions in the area, we'd never really gotten to know one another. He'd never been to Silver Cove before.

"How did you know about my hand?" He could not have possi-

bly seen who was running from the scene the previous night.

"It's a small community," he said. "Word gets around." Then he said, "I guess it will be difficult for you to do your creative work for a short while."

"Yes. For a few days, anyway."

"How are you enjoying your visit to our little island this year? Are you finding many interesting items of local color to weave into your stories, perhaps?"

That question had the almost undisguised chill of a threat about it. How should I answer? "You know how I love your island," I said, after a brief pause. "It is both beautiful and fascinating."

"I trust you will be discreet in your, uh, descriptions of the things you observe."

That comment carried the full impact of his intimidating manner. "I only write fiction," I said.

"A wise choice," he said.

"Based on whatever happens to really fascinate me," I added.

This remark annoyed him, and he stared coldly at me.

My wife wandered out onto the patio, and she too was taken by surprise to see Gibbons there. "Oh, hello, Mr. Gibbons," she said.

He nodded at her. "Your husband and I were just exchange-

ing a few pleasantries. He is a most sensible man, I trust." As Gibbons was leaving, I watched to be sure he didn't pick up anything of mine.

I saw Cedric Evans the following weekend at another social function, a show and reception at one of the resort hotels for a not very talented local artist, and Evans was clearly not well. "Just a tonic and lime, lots of lime," he said to one of the waiters serving drinks. "I'm a bit out of it today. I'd best skip the gin, regrettably."

And in conversation with me, he said, "I can't understand it at all. I've never had anything quite like it before. It just seemed to come over me rather suddenly. Some sort of tropical malaise, I suppose."

I didn't dare comment. How could I possibly? To begin with, I'd sound like an idiot. And if he should take me seriously, how could I explain not being in touch sooner? And going one step further, I refused to accept his condition as being anything more than coincidence, at least at one level of consciousness. However, at some other level, I was thinking self-preservation. Why look for trouble? I was relieved when Hanford Gibbons didn't make an appearance at the gathering.

"One of our servants referred

to this condition as some sort of chicken fever," Evans added. "Can you imagine such a thing? Chicken fever? Something new for the annals of medicine."

I hardly slept at all the night after the artist's reception, and the next day secretly accepted the fact that the whole business had me totally unnerved. I told my wife I was driving into Port Antonio to pick up a supply of fruit and left to look for Neville.

He was not hard to find. He was near the corner where I first met him, wearing his huge red cap, a blindingly yellow printed T-shirt, and his marvelous smile. "You like the new shirt, mon?" he asked. "I bought it with part of my fee for being a native guide," he said, grinning. He posed for me to read the shirt's inscription, "Life is better with money."

"Neville, I've got to talk to you."

"What is it, mon?"

I told him about Gibbons' visit, and then about Evans' condition, and the fact that the scarf had belonged to Evans. I explained that while I was not inclined to take such things seriously, I wanted his comments as a native of the area.

"I don't know, frankly," he said. "They say black obeah can be strong medicine, but I have

no firsthand experience, only hearsay. I'll keep my eyes and ears open."

News of Evans' worsening condition continued to make the rounds. Whatever the strange malady was, he'd been suffering increasing symptoms of it for days. His wife kept frantically flying in all sorts of specialists in rare tropical diseases, doctors from the States and England, and even one from North Africa, but none of them could come up with a cure or even a certain diagnosis.

I saw Evans once during this time and had to agree I'd never seen a man look so ill and still be alive. I repeatedly considered going to Gibbons and confronting him and asking him to do something, but on the one hand, I refused to admit that such a thing was possible, and at the same time, I was dealing with an element, perhaps small but definitely real, of unmitigated fear.

From time to time, when in Port Antonio, I walked by Gibbons' supermarket and looked through the window at him sitting at his desk in the small enclosure near the front of the store, busily doing paperwork. On one of these occasions he happened to look up and our eyes met. His expression on seeing me made me very un-

easy. After a moment, he nodded, waved with his pencil hand, and returned his eyes to his work. Business as usual.

And then it happened. I woke up in the middle of the night with a touch of nausea and some abdominal pain. I was unable to get back to sleep, and by morning the nausea was worse and the abdominal cramps had become severe. I tried to ignore the symptoms, to keep them from my wife, to assume that whatever had entered my body would leave. But as the day wore on, the symptoms persisted, and even intensified. And others began to appear, such as dryness of the mouth, and a strange, unpleasant taste there. Isilda, the cook, watched my condition develop and commented that it appeared "you have the chicken fever like the other man have."

I also began to wonder what object of mine, what article of clothing or whatever, had fallen into Gibbons' hands, and how he'd gotten it. I suspected everyone. All of our staff. I even began to watch my wife's actions for any sign of suspicious behavior. Then I thought of Neville.

Neville! Was he playing both sides of the street?

Anything for a buck? Business was business. Was that it? Although I felt rotten, I decided

to go into town and confront him, to ask him what he knew. Since the sun was broiling hot, I looked around for the green hat I often wore in the sun. I hadn't worn it in a few days, but it could be almost anywhere, since I was inclined to leave it lying about.

But where was it? My search, slow and methodical at first, gradually became frenzied. Was it in the car? The living room? Upstairs in the bedroom? The dining room? The patio area? On the dock? I ran from place to place, frantically looking behind things, under cushions. I took a second look everywhere, retracing my steps. It was nowhere to be found. I tried to remember the last time I'd seen it. I was certain it was before I fell ill. Who took it? Who? The significant fact was that the hat was gone. I asked Isilda to find it, and even shouted at her, something I never did.

The dull cramps in my body grew fiercer. The pain suggested that something was inside me, thrashing and kicking, trying to get out. The nausea and dizziness grew stronger, and the abdominal pain became unbearable. I gave up the trip into town. I wasn't going anywhere. I could hardly stand up straight. I made it to the bathroom and found a bottle of

strong painkiller. I took a double dose and then a little more. My wife was away somewhere with some of our friends. I crawled onto the bed and lay there, contorted in pain, praying the painkiller would work. The green hat. Where was the green hat? I had to get help. Neville. I had to find Neville. As soon as I had the strength to move. . . .

My wife woke me with the news: Cedric Evans was dead. No one knew the cause of death. No diagnosis had ever been agreed upon. Except possibly the story among Isilda and her cronies that he'd contracted a really bad case of what the Jamaicans called "chicken fever."

Then my wife looked more closely at me. "Are you okay?" she asked. And as her face began to show extreme concern, she began talking about checking my temperature and trying to find a good reliable doctor in the area, if that was possible. She didn't dare even suggest that I might be coming down with whatever had hit poor Cedric Evans.

"I'm fine," I insisted. "Incidentally, where's my green hat? I want it. I'm going into Port Antonio, and I want it."

"It must be around here somewhere. And besides, I

think you ought to stay in bed for awhile. You look terrible. I'm going to try to find a doctor."

"Where's the hat? I want the hat. *And I'm going to town!*"

"Okay. If you feel you must go, then go. You won't need the hat. It's gotten cloudy."

"Then I'll go without it."

I found Neville on his usual beat, on the sidewalk along the main road through Port Antonio. His attire this time was brilliant green, green pants and a green shirt imprinted, "Life is a bitch and then you die." But along with all the green he was wearing the out-sized red cap. I decided I'd have to trust him. What choice did I have?

His eyes showed concern when he recognized me. "Hey, mon, you do not look very well at all today."

"Neville, I need your help, you hear?" I said, grasping at his arms in a helpless manner. "Listen. You've got to do something. Evans is dead. Do you hear me? And whatever it is, I'm coming down with it."

"Not here, mon," he said, looking around at the Jamaicans who were staring at me, an American begging for help from one of them. "Come. Follow me." He led me down a narrow alley between storefronts

to a small clearing, cluttered with garbage and debris.

"Neville, you've got to get me to someone who can stop this thing before it kills me, too. You hear?"

He looked furtively around and then nodded. "Tonight. I'll come for you tonight. Ten thirty. Okay?"

"Okay."

"One thousand Jamaican. Okay?"

I controlled the urge to call him a thief. "Okay."

"See you tonight then, mon." He turned and walked away, leaving me standing there.

When I returned to Silver Cove, my wife informed me that she had arranged for a doctor, a Jamaican who lived in the area and held an important position at the hospital in Port Antonio, to stop on his way home and take a look at me.

"I don't want to see him," I insisted. "It won't do any good."

"What's the matter with you? You're obviously not feeling well. How can you refuse help?"

"He won't know what's wrong with me."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I know."

"He'll be here in a little while. Honestly, I think you've been just a bit deranged ever since you took that crazy trip into the jungle that night with

that young Jamaican."

"I'm going again tonight."

"You're what? Now I'm positive that you've separated yourself from your sanity. You said last time that you were going to research a story idea, and you've hardly written a word since then."

"I'm still going again tonight. Maybe after that I'll be able to start writing."

"The doctor will be here shortly," she said, as if ignoring my last statement.

The Jamaican doctor was well dressed, but his clothes were a little wilted from a long day of activity in the small hospital. His manner was brisk and businesslike, and his examination quite thorough. He made a point of letting me know that he had trained in the United States.

He admitted that he couldn't be sure of the diagnosis, but he suspected I might have developed an infection in the wall of my abdominal cavity. He'd seen a similar case once before. He felt an antibiotic should clear it up, and he gave me a healthy shot. He also gave me some antibiotics in capsule form and advised me to be in touch if I wasn't feeling some relief within a day or two. I was cooperative and agreeable. My major interest was getting rid of him. My thoughts were fo-

cused on going with Neville to a *real* doctor.

Neville showed up on time, and despite my wife's near-violent protests, I left with him. The animal within me was still thumping and clawing as wildly as ever.

After we had gone a short distance toward Port Antonio, I asked Neville to drive. It was a prospect he welcomed, and I was in too much pain to deal with the car. Besides, he knew where we were going.

We drove what seemed like several miles past Port Antonio and came to a fork in the road. He took the left fork, and we went up into the Blue Mountains on roads that curved and wound about, coming at times to what appeared to be unprotected dropoffs of thousands of feet. Finally we came to an intersection with another little side road, and Neville turned off, following the rutted little road deep into the underbrush.

We came to a tiny wood frame house. A small lantern burned on the wall of the porch, and the door leading inside was ajar. "You wait here, mon," Neville said. He got out of the car and went inside, and from where I sat, I could hear him talking with someone but could make out nothing being said.

When they raised their voices from time to time, I could tell they were conversing in Jamaican patois.

I was in pain. Their conversation seemed endless, and I wanted relief. I got out of the car, went up the steps to the porch, and entered the small house.

Neville was talking to a tiny man in a white robe. When he saw me enter, he left the little man and came quickly over to me. "I was just coming for you, mon," he said. "Come and meet the doctor." There was something nervous and hurried about the way he spoke that suggested they had been arguing about me, that maybe the "doctor" had been resisting having anything to do with me, a white American. But I was there.

Neville led me over and introduced me to "Doctor Bountiful Goodness," who was small, delicate, and very old, definitely not the same man we'd seen at the chicken ritual. The tiny man's black skin was heavily wrinkled, and his dreadlocks were a bluish-gray. He wore a badly soiled, full-length white robe, held loosely together around his waist by a snakeskin sash.

The doctor spoke to me in words that were largely patois, but I understood the message,

which was "welcome." His expression and voice suggested polite reserve. I looked at Neville to let him know that I felt uneasy, and Neville said, "He welcomes you to his hospital." Hospital? I took a quick look around at the interior of the "hospital."

It consisted of one room, lit only by a small oil lamp on a desk against one wall. At one end of the room was a large iron woodstove with a fire going and several oversized black pots on it. The pots and the top of the stove looked filthy in the dim light, as if the result of a million spills never wiped away. At the other end of the room were four ragged pallets, lined up side by side on the floor.

The rest of the contents of the room included several chairs and some rough shelves near the desk cluttered with a variety of things: more pots, some bottles, bowls, crocks, some large tropical fruits, husked coconuts, tied bundles of weedy dried vegetation, and several pumpkins. A dead animal, appearing to be some variety of large tropical lizard, hung by its tail near the shelves. The air in the room had a fetid odor.

The doctor spoke again and motioned toward the pallets. I looked at Neville, and Neville said, "He wants you to lie down on one of the beds while he fixes

strong medicine for you. Medicine for inside you and outside."

The doctor led me to the pallets and pointed to the end one as he spoke. "He wants you to lie down here, mon," Neville said. I did as I was told and stretched out on the hard pallet. As I lay there, my feet toward the wall, I could hear them behind me, talking and fussing with the large iron pots on the stove. I turned on my side, my arms pressed against my belly. Despite the pain, I think I must have dozed.

I do not know how much time passed before I felt Neville touch me on the shoulder. "Here, mon," he said. "Sit up. Sit up and drink this." The doctor held out a half of a coconut shell filled with a dark, thick fluid.

I took it and smelled it. The shell was warm, as was the liquid, and the vapor coming from the liquid had a sickening odor. How would I ever get it down? "What is this?" I asked.

"Strong medicine," the doctor said, along with a few words of patois. "Good medicine. Just for you."

"It's special for you, mon," Neville said. "To make you well. Go ahead, mon. Drink it."

I wasn't sure I would be able to, but it was what I had come for. I brought the shell to my

lips, shut my eyes, and gulped it. The taste was many times worse than I had expected, extremely bitter with a fishy aftertaste. A wave of nausea swept over me, and I didn't think I'd be able to hold it down. But somehow I did.

Neville took the shell from me and told me to lie back down. Some minutes later, Neville and the doctor returned to me. Neville was carrying one of the large pots. The doctor unbuttoned my shirt and laid it open. Then he did the same with my pants and pulled down the elastic of my undershorts to bare my entire torso. What next? The doctor began taking sheets of what appeared to be banana tree leaves from the pot where they had been soaking in hot oil. He laid them on my body until I was covered with several layers. This oil, too, had an extremely disagreeable stench about it. The leaves felt neither good nor bad, merely hot and oily.

The doctor spoke a few words and Neville said, "The doctor says you must sleep now." I wondered if I would be able to sleep. But I didn't wonder long. When I awoke, it was mid-morning. Neville and the doctor were sleeping peacefully on pallets next to me. I still had cramps but felt as if they'd let up a bit.

As we were driving home, Neville said, "The doctor saved your life, mon. You know that is true."

"I hope so," I said.

"He would like a thousand Jamaican also," Neville said.

"He'll have it." How else could I respond?

After we'd driven a little farther, I asked Neville what the doctor had put into that stuff he cooked up for me to drink.

"Very good medicine, mon. Many good powerful things."

"Such as?"

"Coconut water."

"Okay."

"Ripe papaya."

"Okay."

"Pumpkin."

"Those don't sound so bad, so far."

"Shark."

"People eat shark."

"Eel."

"Eel?"

"Sea urchin."

"And I drank it?"

"And a whole, live tarantula," he said finally.

When I got home in the early afternoon, my wife was absolutely beside herself. "We've had every policeman in this entire area out looking for you. What shall I tell them, now that you're back?"

"Tell them I'm feeling much better, thanks," I answered. And not wanting to get into it any further with her, I left her seething and went upstairs to the bedroom. I got the two thousand Jamaican and took it down to Neville. Then, avoiding my wife, I returned to the bedroom and stretched out on the bed. I still felt the need for a little more rest. I stared at the hypnotic movement of the slowly turning ceiling fan until I fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

I woke up the next day feeling completely recovered and wanting very much to know more about some of the events of the last couple of days, particularly the healing practices of obeah, I decided to go back and revisit Doctor Bountiful Goodness and his hospital. I retraced the route as accurately as I could remember it from the previous trip, which was made in darkness when I was in intense pain. I'm reasonably certain that I made the right first turn from the main road, but after that it was hopeless. I spent a couple of hours wandering around in the Blue Mountains, trying one obscure little road after another, but I didn't see anything that looked like the doctor's "hospital." It was clear I'd never find it without Neville's help.

I made my way back to the main road and returned to Port Antonio. After parking, I went to where I always found Neville, on the corner in front of the bank, up the street from the farmers' market. He wasn't anywhere in sight.

I began to ask around for him, approaching various other young Jamaicans who would be his peers.

"Who?"

"Neville."

"Neville? Neville who, mon?"

"Neville Churchill."

I received no positive responses, only shrugs, a few comments in patois that I didn't quite understand, and several offers of ganja or good deals on rafting trips. A little discouraged, I got in the car and headed back to Silver Cove. The prospects for doing

more research into obeah practices weren't looking too promising. But at least I had to admit to myself that a vague outline for a possible story was beginning to form in my mind. . . .

As it turned out, I did write a yarn about a Jamaican thief, and I called it "Neville." And my agent got top dollar for it.

And the controversy over bringing legalized gambling to Jamaica seems to go on and on.

As for the green hat, I never found it. And I never saw Neville again. Maybe he made his way to Kingston and stayed there. And as for the background detail for the story, well, I still shudder whenever I happen to recall the taste of Doctor Bountiful Goodness' strong medicine.

(continued from page 3)

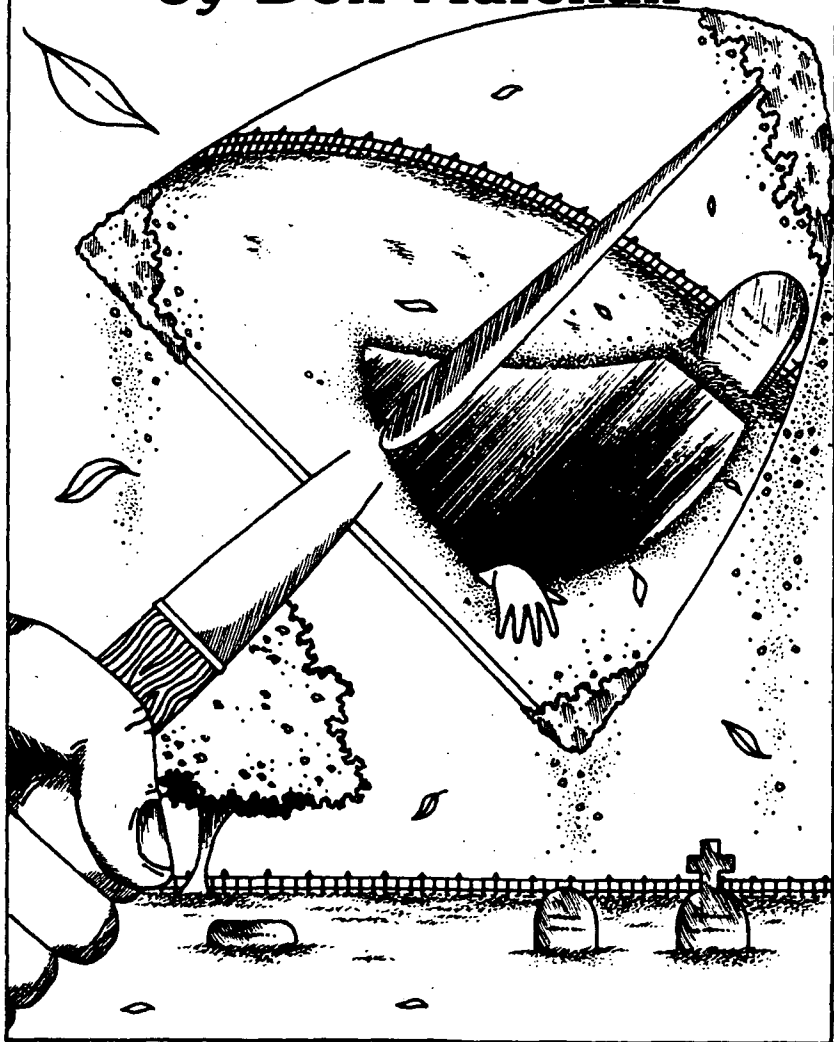
Stanley Cohen, "Neville," and Steve Lindley, "Extended Family." Stan Cohen is a retired engineer who worked for many years at the Olin Corporation. He holds three patents for a modified flexible urethane foam that was the basis for a business venture entered into by Olin from 1970-1985. His last AHMM story appeared in 1975. A more recent story, "Hello! My Name Is Irving

Wasserman," was featured in *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories, 1991*, edited by Edward D. Hoch (Walker). He and his wife live in Orange, Connecticut.

Steve Lindley, who hails from Chicago and attended Southern Illinois University, took up fiction writing in college, as a result of writing classes. The most recent, until now, of his stories for AHMM appeared in 1987.

A Friend in Deed

by Don Marshall



An ornate hearse pulled by four ebony horses rolled along a dusty country road toward a weedy cemetery nestled in a cottonwood copse in Bear Valley, California. The matched quartet decorously bobbed their black-plumed heads in cadence with their clopping hooves and the gentle jingling of their brass-buckled traces. Two stiff-backed men, clad in formal black suits, top hats, and snow-white gloves, sat atop the driver's seat.

"Mr. Nickolas?" asked the younger of the two in hushed tones, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Yes, Andrew?"

"Mr. Nickolas," repeated young Andrew Clark to the middle-aged mortician sitting beside him, "you've always told me to be gentle with folks, just like you are, when someone in a family dies . . . even with the body. But this time you laid out Mrs. Harbinger in the box back there with an awful lot of extra special care. I know you and Mr. Harbinger's been close friends for years, but gee whiz, everyone in town hated Mrs. Harbinger. Nary a soul's sorry she died."

The mortician had been sitting lost in thought about his brand new, custom-made hearse, the finest money could buy. Four oaken posts spiraled to a gingerbread-bedecked tiered roof. Finely-etched ornate windows provided a view of the maroon, padded velvet interior and its contents, a plain pine coffin. Most people would have thought it a dark and foreboding carriage and would have taken little notice of the eloquent craftsmanship and luxurious comfort in which the hated occupant now rode her last mile. But the hearse was the pride and joy of Simon Nickolas, Bear Valley's friendly family mortician. A number of moments passed before the mortician answered his young apprentice.

"Andrew," Simon said, a hint of rebuke in his voice, "first, if I may correct you, that is not, nor should you ever refer to it as, a *box*. It's called a coffin, a casket, or even a sarcophagus, but *never* a box."

"Sorry, Mr. Nickolas," murmured Andrew, embarrassed by what he had said but grateful that his mentor corrected him on minor but essential secrets of the trade.

"Second," continued the mortician, "yes, Mr. Harbinger is my closest friend. I would be remiss if I didn't extend every possible courtesy during his time of crisis and sorrow. The least I can do is provide every possible consideration during these dark hours of his bereavement."

"Third, even though Mrs. Harbinger was the most hated, mean, rabid-mouthed, miserable individual in town, and in spite of what the townsfolk may think, the services of Simon Nickolas, Undertaker, will continue to bestow the epitome of respect upon the newly departed."

"Yes, sir, but it seems as though, in this case, you . . ."

" . . . were more gentle than usual. Is that what you were going to say, Andrew?" Nickolas interrupted. "Well, yes, that's probably true. But it's all because of my long friendship with Henry, er . . . Mr. Harbinger."

"As long as we have some distance to go before reaching the cemetery, I'll explain why, in this particular instance, I am overly solicitous." The undertaker rose slightly from the cushioned seat and turned to check the funeral cortege.

The leading buggy carried the bereaved Mr. Harbinger and whitehaired Mr. Whorley, the old village parson. The second carriage held four dark-suited, somber-faced, grey-haired men recruited by the widower to assist in the delicate task of pallbearing. No others followed to pay their last respects to the deceased Mrs. Harbinger.

Simon Nickolas gently pulled the reins, reminding the horses to maintain their sedate cadence, then continued with his story. "It all began some twenty years ago in a little town called Zanesville . . . that's in Ohio. I first met Henry Harbinger in his general store there. I had recently graduated from undertaking school . . . not really a school, so to speak, but an apprenticeship such as you're taking now."

"I set out on my own to . . . I guess you could say conquer the world. Soon after I started my business, I needed to purchase an interment suit for a poor fellow who, after a hard-drinking session in town, had staggered across a field on his way home, fallen down an open cesspool, and drowned."

"In spite of his body's being fairly fresh, he hardly smelled like a bed of roses. I felt obliged to discard his soiled garments so that his inhumation might at least be bearable."

"Henry . . . Mr. Harbinger most generously gave me a very good price on a slightly moth-eaten suit with *two* pairs of pants. As a result, the services for the deceased proceeded on schedule."

"That being my first interment, I and the family of the deceased, of course, owed a large debt of gratitude to Mr. Harbinger's timely generosity."

Nickolas leaned forward on the carriage seat and casually rested his elbows on his knees. It surprised Andrew that the normally stiff-backed undertaker was capable of relaxing in so easy a fashion. "The remaining set of trousers I used some months later for a pantsless gentleman who expired rather suddenly from bullet wounds as he was diving out a bedroom window, wearing only his coat. Apparently he forsook the opportunity to attire himself properly. No doubt due to the untimely appearance of the woman's husband."

The mortician reached down to his right and slowly applied pressure on the hearse's brake handle. The carriage eased down a grade, then rounded a slight bend in the road. Ahead lay the small, dried-grass covered valley with the cemetery situated on its far side.

"Since Mr. Harbinger's and my first business arrangement proved mutually profitable, we became fast friends." He let out a long sigh. "As you will learn in time, professional undertakers by necessity perform undertaking. This calling put quite a damper on my popularity in the community. But Henry's social life was suffering, too."

Andrew, encouraged by his patron's continued relaxed bearing and uncommon display of humor, ventured a cautious move with thumb and forefinger and pushed his hat top back to relieve the sweaty buildup trapped under the band.

"To go on with my story, Henry earned a comfortable living for his wife and himself, though his Mrs. constantly accused him of living beyond his means.

"If the two of us played chess at night, we burned too much coal oil. If we played checkers in the daytime, she called us lazy. One time, Henry committed the cardinal sin of donating some groceries and old clothes to a destitute widow and her three children. They lived in a shack down by the B & O railroad tracks. Winter was coming, and they faced a bleak future.

"Even I, in my own small way, had tried to help out when she got widowed by a train that ran over her husband. I arranged to bury him in a short grave for half price.

"Henry kept the little family supplied until the widow remarried. She and her new husband paid back every dime—not that Henry ever asked for or expected it."

The mortician clucked the horses, leaned back, and tilted his top hat a half-inch or so above his brow. Andrew noticed the gesture

and sneaked a crooked forefinger inside his stiff celluloid collar to release some of the sweaty steam from his starched shirt.

"After that, Mrs. Harbinger never stopped reminding Henry that he had no business supporting anyone else's family and had better collect interest on the money the widow and her new husband paid back.

"I have to admit that any punishment the bard Dante described in his piece, the *Inferno*, didn't even come close to the harsh rasping of Mrs. Harbinger's vocal vehemence. It's been said . . . not by me, mind you . . . that her squawking, twangy, ear-bursting articulation soured the milk of every bovine within auditory range and withered and stripped every leaf off every tree in the valley, without even a faint hope for a wayward breeze to waft them out of earshot. Even the clams in the river's mud flats hightailed it to the sanctuary of the deep, hoping for a few precious moments of blessed silence."

With a slight shake of his head, mortician Nickolas mused half aloud, "How Henry endured those torments of the damned defies my understanding. But he did, and did it in silence to boot."

Leather harnesses creaked in muted rhythm with the horses' slow gait. A blazing sun beat down upon the parched road. Ahead, a small dust devil danced across the scorched earth. It picked up bits of dried grass and an occasional brown, crackly leaf, it darted under and between the horses' legs. Mischievously, it jumped in front of Andrew and deposited its burden of trash over his black suit, then merrily flitted across the field as if inviting a chase.

The young apprentice desperately longed to remove his white gloves, unbutton his coat, and cool his sweaty body. He resisted the impulse for fear of receiving a disapproving look from the mortician, whose sense of propriety never wavered, even under the most difficult of circumstances. Andrew felt a deepening confusion over his tutor's insistence that they handle the deceased Mrs. Harbinger with utmost caution.

"Yes, Andrew, that woman made life pretty miserable for Henry, his customers, their neighbors, and anyone else unfortunate enough to come within earshot of her.

"A rival store opened up in town and bestowed the final coup de grace. As much as his customers favored Henry, they just couldn't tolerate his Mrs. any longer. Soon, the whole town took their business to the new store.

"When the great rush to the California goldfields started, Henry

decided to pull up stakes and head west. I, of course, always enjoyed a rather adventurous spirit and entertained a desire to visit the goldfields, too. So we both sold out and, ignoring her vitriolic prattle, caught the stage for New York and boarded a steamer for Panama. All the way south, she carped about its leaky seams, the ill-mannered crew, and the bad food.

"We landed at Colón, engaged a canoe, and paddled upriver towards the staging point for the mule trains. All the while, she harangued our Indian guides to the point that four of them clamped their hands over their ears and leaped overboard. Apparently they preferred facing the caimans and poisonous snakes to enduring another minute of her caterwauling. Much the same thing happened later with the mules."

"But, Mr. Nickolas, if she were that obnoxious, how come you put up with it?"

"That, Andrew, is a very good question. The reason I 'put up with it,' as you say, is, first, that I, like old Parson Whorley, am a bit deaf. Second, and most important, as you will find out, is that men in our profession always enjoy the privilege of having the last word."

Andrew savored the words "men in our profession." A flood of pride surged through him when he realized that the mortician had referred to him as an equal.

Nickolas brushed off a bit of offending dust from his sleeve cuffs, scratched his nose, and continued his narration. "Eventually we arrived here in the Sierras, Henry to open his store, I to start this business, and Mrs. Harbinger to start trouble. In no time at all, she scolded, carped, rebuked, and chided every man, woman, and child in the county, and I don't believe she missed many of the horses, mules, chickens, dogs, cats, or Indians, either.

"Then one blessed day . . ." the older man paused. Andrew thought he glimpsed a hint of a smile flashing across the mortician's normally stoic face. "About five years ago, during one of her vein-popping tirades over some nonsense, she dropped dead."

Andrew forgot about an annoying bead of sweat trickling down his rib cage and sat bolt upright as though stung by a scorpion.

"Died? *Five* years ago! Mr. Nickolas, you're joshing me. She died *yesterday!*"

"Oh, yes, I know. But this is her second death. Let me explain. You see, there brews in the heads of some individuals a condition, a sort of nervous affliction, perhaps inherited. It occasionally subjects

these poor souls to cataleptic fits, a suspension of the bodily senses and reflexes, and causes a muscular rigidity closely resembling death. It seems that unbeknownst to Mr. Harbinger or myself, his Mrs. suffered from this peculiar malady."

Nickolas took note of the cemetery gate just a few hundred yards ahead, straightened his back, adjusted his hat, and assumed a more professional position on the padded hearse seat.

"We gave her a proper funeral . . . up to a point. Henry, in spite of his most profound grief, seemed to enjoy the blissful respite from her wagging tongue."

"But you said, up to a point. What did you mean?" asked the puzzled apprentice.

"Ah, yes. Well . . . you see that fancy wrought-iron gateway up there ahead?" He pointed a bony finger toward the entrance to the cemetery, where two latticework columns supported an ornate arched span.

"Yes," Andrew nodded.

"Well, I drove the horses right up to the gate as I always do. The ride had been pretty bumpy, 'cause my old hearse wasn't smooth riding like this new one. It didn't have the modern C springs, the cross leather suspension, and the padded interior. This is the latest model, you know," he proudly added. "At any rate, the heat was oppressive, just like today. My attention wandered, and perhaps I drove a bit too close to the gate, because we felt quite a bump. We drove on in and unloaded the coffin in kind of a hurry, as we all were in a rush to get home out of the heat.

"One of the pallbearers with acute hearing abilities detected a muffled cry that came from the interior of the casket. Lo and behold! When we opened the lid to investigate, up popped Mrs. Harbinger, her eyes blinking like a frog's in a hailstorm and her mouth, as usual, working overtime."

"Golly, Mr. Nickolas, what a close call! Think of it—she almost got buried alive." The morbid thought sent shivers up and down Andrew's spine in spite of the blazing sun and his heat-absorbing dark suit. He imagined the horror of lying hopelessly trapped in a sealed coffin, listening to shovelfuls of earth thudding down overhead.

"Yes, indeed, it was a close call. I spoke to the doctor afterwards. He explained that the combination of the bumpy ride and the sharp rap on the gatepost jarred Mrs. Harbinger back to consciousness."

The plumed horses drew the hearse abreast of the burial ground.

"Whoa, easy now," cautioned Nickolas as he pulled back the brake handle and cautiously locked it in place. "Now, Andrew, here we are, safe and sound. Remember, propriety is our stock in trade. When you climb down, do it slowly, quietly, and with dignity. Place yourself at the rear of the hearse, and gently open the door. I will direct the pallbearers. After services, remain with the horses while I fill in the grave."

Young Andrew performed exactly as instructed. Mr. Harbinger and old Parson Whorley alighted from their carriage and slowly walked in silence along the weed-lined path to Mrs. Harbinger's gravesite. The four men, hand-picked by Simon Nickolas, stepped down from their carriage and sedately assembled at the rear of the hearse. The lanky undertaker positioned himself to one side of the group. Andrew placed his hand on the door latch and, as cautioned, moved it gently downward. It made a slight click as the catch was released. He swung the door open. The four stone-faced men slowly pulled the pine coffin from the interior.

Andrew surveyed the length of the coffin. A sudden thought struck him; his eyes grew round. "Oh, Mr. Nickolas?" he called.

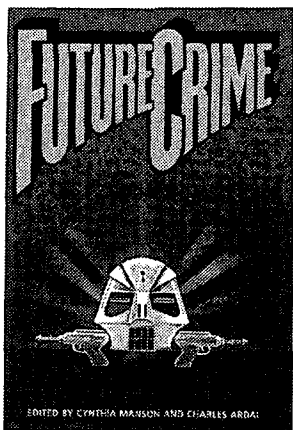
"Shhh! Not now, Andrew," whispered the funeral director, placing his index finger over his lips. "Remember . . . decorum's the word."

"But, sir," insisted Andrew with a hint of urgency in his hushed voice.

"Andrew, that is enough!" the mortician rasped in a hoarse whisper.

The young apprentice nodded. Gee whiz, he thought, I only wanted to ask if the same thing might not happen all over again . . . that "cataclysmic fit" or whatever he called it.

"Now, gentlemen, two of you to a side. Be careful to lift in unison," said Nickolas in hushed tones. "And please, boys . . . *don't bump that post.*"



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FICTION

Extended Family

by Steve Lindley

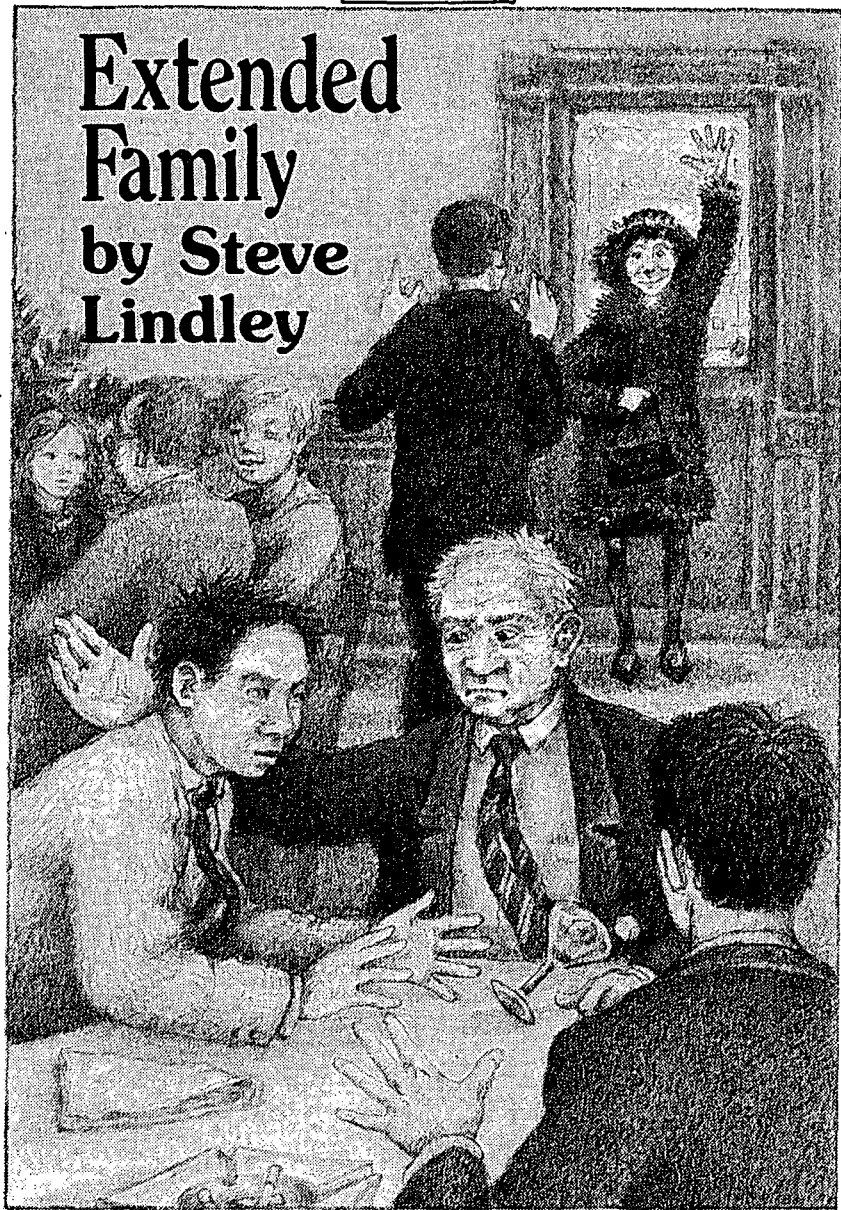


Illustration by Donald Cook

52
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Rick Evans's mother loved him. The rest of the world was, at best, ambivalent. He was the type of young man for whom you found yourself making excuses. He was a floater, a haranguer. He was a little too loud, a little too smart, and a little too drunk a little too much of the time. He was a tough kid to like. Maybe he now realized that. Maybe that was why he showed up in my office after fifteen years and didn't ask me for a favor but offered me a fee for a service.

"He wants you to do what?" Luanne asked afterwards.

"He wants me to meet his father."

"I thought you told me his father was dead."

"I did. And that's one of the reasons I balked. But I'm having dinner with them both this Thursday."

Luanne, my secretary, made a face, not a very pretty one. It was difficult for Luanne to make a pretty face.

"Ricky and his dead father?"

"Correct. And since when did Mr. Evans become Ricky?"

Another face. I shared Luanne with five other men, though if they wanted her they usually looked for her first in my office. Over the years it had become an unwelcome joke. Even her reception desk, each year, seemed to move ever

closer to my doorway until now she was out of sight only when I closed and locked my office door. I had confronted her about this once, down on my hands and knees before her, holding a ruler against the skid marks on the worn wood floor. She claimed ignorance. The cleaning crew (another running gag) took the blame.

"Mind if I join you?"

"What, Thursday? Of course I mind."

I thought I saw her shiver then. It was cold inside the office. I had cracked the window to protect myself from her cigarette smoke, and a December drizzle was blowing in. There was little to shield the tiny, frazzle-haired brunette from the cold. Her joints were knobs, her limbs sticks over which her hose sagged.

"And why," I asked, "this sudden interest in Rick Evans? You want me to set you up with him or something?"

"No," she said. "Just interested. He said he was an old friend of yours, that you used to work together."

"We drank together. About a hundred and fifteen years ago."

"That's all?"

"That's all I remember, believe me."

"Then why would he come to you and ask you to dinner with his dead father?"

"Believe it or not," I said, "he seems to have the impression that I'm a detective."

Rick's call had come Friday morning, a stranger's voice that had to repeat its name twice before it registered. After five difficult minutes of a dark trip down memory lane, I guessed it only appropriate to ask him if he wanted to meet for lunch or after work for a drink. He didn't. He wanted to make an appointment to see me. I said he didn't need one, to stop by that afternoon. He asked me again if I worked at Sentinel Security, and I said yes. He asked me if I was vice president and I said yes. That was all he needed to hear.

Sentinel, on the third floor of a building on Ninety-fourth and State, resembles less an office than a weathered bus depot, and serves chiefly as a check-in station for every lunatic on the south side of Chicago licensed to carry a handgun. I had arrived there six years ago, answering a newspaper ad for a security guard. I had never done that sort of work before, but I had done everything else and was desperate enough for a job to brave the neighborhood and the building. The office, however, was too much. Produvnik, Sentinel's president,

caught me as I was making my escape. He put his arm around my shoulders, corralled me back inside, and assured me I had "the right stuff" for a career in the security field.

After four weeks of sitting nervously in the dead of night in empty buildings, I realized that whatever the right stuff was for security guards, I didn't have it. The day I announced my resignation was the day I became vice president of the firm. I was aghast.

"Kid," Produvnik said, draping his arm around me again, breathing his tuna sandwich on my cheek, "I've had my eye on you for a long time."

"I've only been here a month."

"Time is relative. Anyway, you've proved to me you have what it takes. You don't drink before lunch, you can talk to people without crossing yourself up, and you're not a psycho. I want you to be part of our little family. What do you think about that?"

"Frankly," I said, "it scares the hell out of me."

"Okay. I'll keep you at the same pay rate even though you'll be working days. I'll even let you keep the gun."

"I don't want the gun. I've never touched the gun. I think it's tucked in one of my shoes in my closet."

"No problem. Old Kennedy's been asking for a gun. We'll give it to him."

"I'll keep the gun."

"Enough chitchat. We've got a business to run. Let me show you your new office."

It was some lousy office. It certainly seemed to impress Rick Evans, though. He couldn't believe I had my very own desk, and kept touching it and pulling his chair up closer to it. He arrived in a flannel shirt and work boots. He still looked very young, and I put that down to the fact that he had lived with his mother most of his life. Even fifteen years ago I knew he was too old to be living with his mother. I asked him how she was, and he told me she was dead. Cancer. A year ago last December ninth. A Saturday. He recited it to me as crisply as if he had been thinking about it on the way up.

"But I came here to talk about my father," he said. "Did I ever tell you about him?"

He might have, one night in some bar, but I certainly wouldn't have remembered if he had, so I said no.

"He's dead, too. At least, he was until last week. I never met him. He died when I was two or something. How am I supposed to remember some-

thing like that? I mean, I don't know what I was doing when I was two. I mean, you look at a picture of yourself with your mom, and you say, who are these people? Does this run by the minute?"

I must have been looking at my watch.

"Don't get me wrong," he said. "I've got money. I just don't know how these things work."

I assured him this was just a conversation with an old friend and, as such, it was gratis.

"How did your father die?"

"His liver. That's what my mother told me. The old medicine supposedly did him in."

"But it doesn't seem to be affecting him now."

"Oh, it's left its marks. At least on this guy, whoever he is."

"Then you don't think he is your father."

"Hell, I don't know." Evans rubbed his upper lip. He was vacillating between the need to blurt out everything to anybody and his instinct to bottle up and make a joke of it.

He told me he had received a phone call last week from a Bill Harding who claimed to be his father. He had thought it a crank call and had hung up. The man phoned again. He apologized for calling. He sounded sincere. He said he

had been living in San Francisco for years, ever since he had run out on Rick and his mother when Rick was two years old. As he grew older, he found himself thinking more and more about the son he didn't really know. Then, the other day, he was watching some morning talk show on television. Its subject was the reunions of fathers who had skipped out on their families. The show had moved him to tears, so he packed a bag, flew back to Chicago, and was now living out of a hotel room downtown.

"He gave me the whole sob story," Evans said. "About his having no money back then and being freaked out by the responsibility of having a kid, and why he left, and how he's so sorry now. He cried. The man cried over the phone. I nearly hung up on him again listening to that."

"But you decided to meet him."

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"In a restaurant. He's got this thing about restaurants."

"He recognized you."

"Sure did. The place was crowded, too. I'm sitting at the bar, hear this voice behind me. 'Son,' he says, and I turn around and he hugs me. He's got this thing about hugging.

He's built like a bear. I don't have too many ribs left. What's the matter?"

I had been tapping my pencil eraser on my desktop.

"Rick," I said. "The right way to go about this is to hire yourself a lawyer. A good one will be able to find out if your father did die and when and how. It's all a matter of public record."

But Evans was shaking his head.

"I can't do that. What if he really is my father and he got wind of my doing something like that? I'd feel like a jerk. But, then, if he isn't my father, I'd feel like an even bigger jerk calling him dad for the rest of my life. That's why I want you to meet him. You'd know the right questions to ask. Me, I can't get past his questions to ask my own."

"My friend, I'm not a detective."

"You're not? Then what's all this?"

"It's a security firm. I plant retired women behind two-way mirrors in ladies' dressing rooms. Sometimes they invite their husbands to join them for lunch and I have to let them go."

He was crushed. "You mean, nobody here is a detective?"

"Well," I said, "one used to be."

He brightened. "Great. That

clinches it. My problems are solved."

Old Kennedy had been with Questar Investigations ten years back when Sentinel had taken it over. He had stayed put. His office was far down the hall at the east end of the building past the bathrooms and utility closets. Even the building's heat never seemed able to reach it. The only time I ever had to deal with him was when he came for his paycheck every other Thursday.

"You're crazy," he told me.

The office had one filthy window overlooking a parking lot bright only at night. The room was crowded with Kennedy's past, papers and mementos that would be buried with him. It smelled of his wife's cooking, as did Kennedy, as did his grandchildren, whom he babysat every Friday. One was on his lap now, knocking pens and paper clips off his desk.

"No," he said after some thought. "You're stupid. He's crazy. You meet this guy, you'll only make things worse."

"How could it hurt?"

"To begin with, you don't have a reference point to check this guy's story. Your friend tells you certain things, but you can't trust him because

this guy's been putting ideas in his head for the past week. It's the old palm-reading scam. First you ask the mark a dozen questions about himself, then you digest the answers and throw back a story that fits."

"That's if this is a con job."

"Right. If it isn't, it's a cakewalk. You've got your friend's birth certificate? Of course you don't."

(I asked Evans the next day if he had his birth certificate. His answer: "Who the hell does?")

"Has Evans talked to any of his other relatives about this?" Kennedy asked.

"As far as I know, as far as he knows, he has no other relatives. There was just his mother."

"And she's dead."

"Right."

"That's too bad."

"He feels the same way."

"I don't suppose this means she'll be joining you Thursday night along with Mr. Evans."

"Harding. Rick has his mother's name. He never knew his father's."

"Look, Mike," Kennedy said, "if this Harding is for real, there's got to be a reason he's doing this. Did Rick's mother leave him anything when she died? Money? A house?"

I told him what Evans told me. They had been renting the

same apartment for twenty years. She had left him nothing but a ten thousand dollar life insurance policy, half of which he had spent on her funeral. The rest went to a down payment on a new Chrysler, which had been repossessed last October.

Kennedy told me to think hard, try to remember anything I could about Evans. Nothing came to me. Then I remembered meeting a mutual acquaintance a few years back, very much by accident, in line at a bank or supermarket or something. We'd been discussing old times, Rick's name had come up, and this acquaintance had told me he had heard that Rick had wound up in jail at some point. I had found it hard to believe.

"That's good," Kennedy said. "Processed through Cook County?"

"If it's true, I'd imagine. Evans seems anchored to the west side."

"Maybe this old man was a jailbird, too. I'll tell you what. I'll make some phone calls, maybe you won't have to meet this guy at all. How much money have you got?"

"Money?"

"Investigations cost money."

"I thought we were all in this together."

"You did?"

"I sign your paychecks, remember."

"Which is exactly why you don't want me freelancing on company time. Look, Mike, I've got a lot of irons in the fire." He bounced his grandson on his knee. "Right, Billy?"

Billy responded by stuffing a paper clip up his nose. Kennedy thought that was wonderful.

Sunday afternoon I met Rick Evans in his apartment. He had left his mother's bedroom relatively untouched. He had given most of her clothes to charity, had kept only a few of her favorite dresses. He had found himself unable to discard the ratty housecoat she had padded around in the last few years of her life.

All her important papers and photo albums were kept in two boxes on the floor of her closet. I went through them while Rick stood over me.

"You know what really sticks in my craw," he said. "If he did run out on her, and she's going to make up a story about it, why didn't she make him a Korean war hero or something? A downed fighter pilot. Why tell me he drank himself to death?"

"Ask him, Rick. Ask him."

"I did. He says he figures it was maybe her way of keeping me from becoming a sport like

him. Some plan, huh." And he gave me the grin of the unreformed drinker.

I felt uncomfortable going through his mother's things. I tried to detach myself into the role of mere observer (detective even!) but couldn't shake off the awkward feeling of my own flesh and blood presence. And whether it was this feeling, or the photos of his mother, or the apartment itself, I suddenly remembered a morning I had long forgotten, one I had dismissed fifteen years ago as just another morning.

It was Christmas Eve morning. I had waked on the couch in the front room of this apartment after a long office party. I remembered nothing of the previous night. Rick's bedroom door was closed, but his mother was already up. It was the only time I had ever met her. She seemed comfortable enough with my presence, her in her housecoat, me in yesterday's wrinkled clothes, a blanket over my lap. I tried to mold my hair into respectability while she offered me breakfast and knocked on Rick's bedroom door. Eventually he came out and helped himself and me to anything in the refrigerator she hadn't offered me and some things she had.

Once we were settled at the kitchen table, the three of us,

he informed her he would be going out that afternoon. She asked him when he would be back and he told her he didn't know. She worked nights. It was Christmas Eve, but she worked the front desk in a hotel and worked nights.

I took a shower. When I came out, she was handing him his Christmas present. It was nothing, really, the sort of thing you might drop in a Christmas stocking. It was so nothing I don't even remember what it was. He handed her hers. It was a pin, a huge, gaudy, ridiculous pin. She was standing at the table, unwrapping it, and he was sitting, still working on a plate of scrambled eggs. She told him it was a magnificent pin and bent over and kissed him on the forehead. He kissed her on the cheek.

Then he and I left. We had a couple of bloody Marys to get our blood flowing. When I left him he was on his way to see a friend.

The memory of it exhausted me, and I dropped the papers back into the box.

"Well?" Rick asked.

There was nothing. No photos, no useful papers. No trace. A void. "It's as though," I told him, "you never had a father."

"Immaculate conception, huh?"

I looked up at him. He was

scratching his head, and when he finished one clump of hair stood straight up. He smiled. He looked downright goofy.

"I doubt it."

"Spent some time in jail? Did he ever."

It was Thursday morning, and I had resigned myself to the fact that I would be sharing dinner with Rick and his father. Kennedy had just buzzed my intercom. I didn't know he knew how to operate the thing. Luanne was behind me, helping me with the buttons.

"Richard Evans was busted in 1985 for grand theft and destruction of federal property. He spent four years in Stateville. Up until that time his record was reasonably clean."

"Pretty stiff for a first offense," I said. "What did he steal? Better yet, what did he destroy? A monument?"

"I don't know," Kennedy said. "They won't tell me. I'm getting back into insurance. You work in insurance, they'll tell you everything."

I did some arithmetic. "Does that mean he was locked up when his mother died?"

"It does. It's a sad story. I guess the arrest hit her pretty hard. She got weaker and weaker until she couldn't even

visit him any more. The state did give him a weekend furlough when they found out she was about to eat it."

"Then he did see her, at least."

"Nope. She threw him a loop, died the day before the furlough went into effect. She was found by one of her nurse friends on her bathroom floor, probably headed for the medicine cabinet. I told you to find yourself a nice nurse, Mike. At least somebody to find your body when it happens."

"Thanks. I will."

"Anyway, Evans's pass was revoked. You can't trust a guy loose after something like that. And it gets worse. Remember that repossessed Chrysler? The reason it was repo'd was that Evans was picked up on a DUI a few months back. He stopped payments because he can't drive it. And he's still on parole. Your friend is in deep trouble."

"No information on the old man?"

"Nothing. I've been throwing his name around. Nobody's ever heard of him. It's like he appeared out of nowhere. Hope you've worked up an appetite for tonight."

"Thanks."

"Oh, by the way. You know an Al Parker?"

I did remember Parker, an-

other bar hound Evans and I had drunk with years ago.

Kennedy continued, "He was the one who put up bail for Evans in '85. If you want to know what the arrest was all about, he'd be the one to ask. You cough up five grand, you tend to demand an explanation as to why."

Luanne brought me the Chicago White Pages. There were three Parker, Alberts. We made the calls, dead-ended.

"Just one phone book," Luanne said. "If he's still in the metropolitan area, he'll be a cinch to find."

"Not before dinner."

"Speaking of dinner, I just bought the most gorgeous—"

I told her I was doing fine on my own.

Not that I had any right to make such a statement. The dinner, though, had begun cordially enough, and I had even squeezed out of the old man the name of the street he had lived on in San Francisco. It was when I had inquired about his exact address that he had become suspicious. After that, I couldn't say anything without getting an icy stare and an abrupt response in return. Evans, having given up, was sucking the last of the liquor left on his ice cubes and looking feverishly for our waiter. The old

man, sweating over mineral water, had told him twice to wait for dinner before ordering another drink.

"I was only wondering," I said, trying to get the conversation back to the reason I was there, "because I used to know a woman who lived on that block."

"What was her name?"

"Martha."

"Martha what?"

Washington was the first name to spring into my head. It left my lips as Washburn.

"What building did she live in?"

"The brown one. On the hill."

I had never been to San Francisco.

"I don't know her," he said deliberately enough to let me know, in case I had been fooling myself, that she didn't exist.

"Where's our waiter?" Rick was getting louder, too loud for the type of mink coat and crystal restaurant in which we three had been seated, if only to torture the other patrons, smack in the middle of the room.

"Eat a roll."

"I don't want a roll. I want another drink."

"Keep your voice—"

"I'm a grown man. I want another drink."

The barrel-torsoed old man hardly moved. He simply

raised his arm as if to rest it on the back of Rick's chair, and casually cuffed him on the back of the head.

Evans was speechless. Open-mouthed, he gaped at the old man, then at me. Then he looked around the room at our audience and a curious look came over his face. I braced myself for the inevitable confrontation. But something else had caught Rick's eye.

"Get a load of that," he said. I turned around and spotted our waiter and maitre d' trying to shoo a woman out the restaurant door. "The last time I saw something like that she was tugging at the back of my coat at a two dollar Vegas blackjack table."

The skinny girl was wearing a ridiculously fat coat that might have been made of rat. Her face was pancaked white, her lips painted red all over her face, and her hair was bunned up under what looked like a Woolworth's tiara.

"Hey, Mike," Rick said to me. "I think she's waving at you."

I laid my head down on the table.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?"

"No," I told Luanne, the next morning in my office. "How could I possibly be angry with you?"

"I don't know about you, but I had the time of my life. I think Rick's father is sweet."

Much to the chagrin of our waiter, we had become a foursome. In the hour following Luanne's grand entrance, I had learned more about her than I had ever wanted to know. The old man had turned matchmaker, one arm around Rick, the other around Luanne. He couldn't praise his son more highly or nod his head more vigorously at everything Luanne said, including a rambling lecture on how she kept the mildew off her bathroom tiles (wiping on a thin layer of floor wax). He even let Rick order that drink and insisted Luanne have two piña coladas, sending the first one back because the pineapple garnish was browned at the edges.

Luanne propped herself on my desk, offering me way too much of a view of her skinny thighs. One of her stockings had a hole in it. "I found Al Parker," she said. I said nothing. "Hey," she said. "Look at this."

I thought she was referring to the legs and was about to make an appropriate comment when she pulled a photograph out of her jacket pocket. It was a bad Polaroid taken from too far away of four people seated at a restaurant table, two of whom were laughing.

"So," I muttered at it. "Last night really did happen."

"Is that all?"

"Who took it?"

"A friend of mine. I had her staked out at the bar. All right, she's not a professional photographer. She does nails. She's a blonde. Maybe you'd like to meet her."

"Staked out?"

Just then Kennedy appeared in my office. He wanted to know how the dinner had gone. I told him the prime rib was fantastic, the rest was a waste of time.

"I blew it," I said. "It started out well. I got a San Francisco street name, Lakewood, but when I pressed him for an address, he clammed up. I guess I was pumping the questions too fast and he became evasive."

Kennedy thought for a moment. "Or?" he said.

"Or what?"

"Or the name of the street just slipped out and he immediately realized he'd told you too much, which means he has something to hide. Lakewood, huh. Is that all?"

Luanne showed him the photograph. He stared hard at it. "Believe it or not," he said, pocketing it, "this guy looks vaguely familiar. Anyway, I have an old friend who works out of Frisco, but then he doesn't call it Frisco. But then, he calls Chicago Chitown.

Funny world, isn't it? I'll give him a call."

Al Parker lived in a western suburb called Bolingbrook. His house was an ugly ranch model, lit desperately with layers of Christmas lights. He and his wife were in the finished basement while the kids played upstairs. She was curled up in socks and sweats on the couch, pulling price tags off of gifts. He was on the floor with wrapping paper.

"I think his problem," he said, about Rick, "is that he's never worked a real job long enough to know just how real a job can be. That, and the fact he's never been married." The wife grunted. "He still thinks he can just up and do anything anytime he wants, if you know what I mean."

"I do," I said.

"I still saw him occasionally back in '85. He was still drinking like a fish. One Friday night, he and a couple of other guys whom I don't really know at all found themselves with a little too much energy and a lot of liquor in them after all the bars had closed. From what Rick told me, one of the fellas remembers this new federal building going up on Wabash. You know how that sort of thing attracts people. Out here

in the 'burbs they go rummaging through construction sites for wood and bricks. Only, Rick and his buddies broke in and found themselves in a room full of IBM typewriters.

"He said there must have been fifty of them. Brand new. Well, nobody's going to miss ten or so, and they're only ripping off the government, so they start loading them into Rick's car. What happens? A squad car rolls by. And, like idiots, these three jump in the car and take off. The squad follows them. Two more come up behind them. The next thing they know, they're in high speed pursuit down the Stevenson Expressway throwing five hundred dollar IBM typewriters out the car window. It's the sort of thing your lawyer tells you to give up and plead guilty to. You don't mess with the Feds."

"Why did you put up the five grand to bail him out?"

"Why?" Parker shrugged. "Why not?" The wife grunted again. "I don't know. He could have run. He didn't. I guess I really feel bad for the guy. I mean, it's strange how doing one stupid thing like that can mess up your life. But then, if your life isn't messed up in the first place . . . Say, Mike. What are you doing Christmas Eve?"

"Me? Why?"

"Well, it's only going to be us

and the kids this year. My family's in Florida, and Helen's is in Detroit. We're going to be cooking a turkey."

I could feel Helen stiffen on the couch, but when I looked at her, she smiled and seconded the invitation. I told them I was sorry, that I couldn't make it. Before my lies became too elaborate, the phone rang upstairs. One of the kids called down that it was for me. It was Kennedy.

"I located," he said, "a certain address on a certain street in Frisco." I told him he didn't have to be so cryptic, that I doubted the lines were tapped.

"Mr. Harding," he said, "Rick Evans's temporary daddy, did live at that address for nine years."

"Did live?"

"He's dead. He died last March in a San Francisco veteran's hospital."

"Again? How many times is this guy going to be resurrected?"

"I think you'd better get down to the office."

"He was a cop," Kennedy said, sitting back with his feet on his desk. "Bill Harding lived his entire life in Northern California. He fathered six children, God bless him, saw his

wife of thirty years die in 1979, retired a year later, lived alone . . .” Kennedy scratched behind his ear. “Okay, it doesn’t necessarily rule out a trip to Chicago for a one-night stand with a young Miss Evans some thirty years back, but let’s face it, there’s nothing to even remotely link Bill Harding and Rick Evans.”

“So, who the hell did I have dinner with last night?”

“I told you about my friend. He’s good. Not as good as me. Lakewood only runs twelve blocks, and most of it is single family homes. My friend traces Harding to a three-flat, finds out he’s dead. He talks to the neighbors. They say he kept pretty much to himself, saw his kids every other holiday, but spent most of his time down at the local VFW hall. My friend heads down there and talks to the oldsters. They tell him Harding hung with a small group of retired cops, one of whom was an ex-Chicago cop. Eureka.

“The man who paid for your prime rib last night is named Walters, and he’s a native of Chicago. I thought he looked familiar. Take a look at this. You might remember it.”

He handed me a copy of the *Chicago Monitor* dated June 19, 1983. There was a grainy news photo of the old man whom Luanne, Rick, and I had

dined with. He was standing over a ratty-haired kid in his mid-teens. They were both smiling. The old man had his hand on the kid’s shoulder.

“The kid in the picture,” Kennedy said, “is Buddy Simmons, a runaway from somewhere down south. Landed in Chicago, had the kind of lousy time a runaway kid has when he’s lost in the city, until one Saturday night he slits his wrists in the downtown Greyhound station pay toilet. Walters was the cop who responded.

“He got there in time, saved the kid’s life. The kid still won’t go home, claims his parents don’t want him back. Walters is six months away from retirement with no family of his own to speak of, so he sort of took it upon himself to see that the kid finished high school here on the south side. Do we see a pattern emerging here? He even put him through a semester of college downstate. The papers covered it for a while, human interest, then got tired of it. Here’s the last article ever written about little Buddy.”

Kennedy handed me another Xerox. The item wasn’t played up like the first, just two inches of column, no photo. It was about a University of Illinois student named Buddy Simmons who had hanged himself

in his dorm room. Some mention was made of previous suicide attempts and the fact that he was a student in good standing.

"I'd be willing to bet my meatloaf sandwich," Kennedy said, "that that's what sent Walters out to Frisco."

I looked back at the photo of a beaming Walters standing with his adopted son. "But why did he take Harding's name when he came back here?"

"Easy. He couldn't use his own because he could be traced too easily here, even by an outfit like Sentinel. He couldn't use Evans because it's the mother's maiden name. He took the name of a dead acquaintance. Granted, being a cop, Walters must have known his cover wouldn't stand up to a thorough investigation, but he probably figured it wouldn't have to. The only mistake he made was letting that address slip out to you last night."

"Funny," I said. "A lot of trouble to go to just to come back and keep Rick Evans eating dinner rolls instead of ordering gin and tonics. What do you think possesses a guy like this?"

Kennedy shrugged. "I don't know. Crazy, I guess. Why do people steal babies out of hospitals? What makes you put out a saucer of milk for a scrawny

cat that's keeping you up nights with its howling?"

"But why Rick?"

"Somehow he heard the howling. Most likely it came from here. He's an ex-cop. What does that tell you?"

I caught Evans's parole officer late the next morning in the hallway outside his office. He was a thin man with slumped shoulders and a tired gait and deep-set gray eyes. He smoked cigarettes down to the filters while we talked between a drinking fountain and the elevator doors.

Yes, he was the connection. No, he didn't know that Walters was back in town; he had sent another letter to him in San Francisco just the day before yesterday. He had been corresponding with Walters ever since he had moved out west. No, they were never very good friends; the correspondence had just happened the way those things do. It started with a postcard from Walters, a short letter returned, a longer one sent back in response. He kept the letters up if only to reassure himself old Walters was still alive. After all, who else did the poor man have?

"I did mention Evans in one of my letters," he said, staring down at the filter of his cigarette. "I don't know why. I

mean, Evans does make his own bad luck, but there's something about the way he bounces wide-eyed from one mess to another... It was the sort of thing I thought might interest Walters, make a good letter. That's funny, isn't it, in light of all this?"

I told him it was funny.

"He did ask me a lot of questions about Evans in the return letter. I suppose you think I should have seen this coming." I said nothing. He asked me if I had told Rick yet and I said no. He asked me when I was going to and I said I didn't know.

"I guess I could talk to Walters," he said. He nodded his head. "I probably should."

I'll never know if he did or not. It was Christmas Eve and the office was clearing out early. I hadn't spoken to Evans since our dinner the previous week. Kennedy popped his head in my office on his way home and told me he had prepared my bill for his services.

"You're sure you don't want me to wrap this up?" he asked. "From here it's all paperwork. I could have it on your desk Monday morning."

I told him no, thanks, I couldn't afford it. I told Luanne she might as well leave early, too, but she told me she had no

plans anyway and continued organizing my file cabinet.

"You don't rearrange file cabinets on Christmas Eve," I told her.

"What, is there a law?" she returned, and I dropped the argument. The phone rang. I reached for it, but my secretary would have none of that and lurched in her heels for the thing before I could get to it, nearly falling into my lap. "Sentinel Security," she sang, then cupped her hand over the mouthpiece. "It's Ricky," she said.

Looking back, I'm certain it was all a plot. Rick told me I could drop the investigation. Mr. Evans-Harding-Walters was out of his life forever.

"He came over last night with his suitcases," he said. "Moved right in. He brought a ham with him. I said, What's all this? He said, a ham. Christmas dinner. I said, wait a minute. But there was no stopping him. He does my dishes. He pours my booze down the sink. That was too much. I said, What the hell are you doing? and he says he brought eggnog. I hate eggnog. I go into my bedroom to bang my head against the wall for a minute or so, and when I come out he's standing in the middle of my front room wearing my mother's old apron with a dust-cloth in one hand and a cigar in

the other. What a vision! I couldn't take it any more. He's gone. He's out. Bye-bye."

"That's okay, Rick."

"He's crazy, isn't he?"

"I guess he is."

"Anyway . . ." There was silence on the line. "Anyway, I don't think he'll be coming back, but I don't know if I really want to stay here tonight." More silence. "Just in case." Silence. He cleared his throat. His voice came back brighter. "Hey, Mikey, you remember that Christmas party back when we worked together? The one that went all night and you passed out on my couch?"

I told him I remembered.

"Well," he said. "I was just thinking, seeing as how . . . say, was that Luanne who answered the phone?"

It didn't snow that night, but the streets were wet from a week of freezing drizzle, and they reflected the lights of the season all around us. And Luanne was laughing as her heels skidded in the slush and we carried her up over the curb, Rick on her right arm and me on her left. And we ran together, full of drink, giggling like goons, past the bright windows of cafes where old men sat alone eating their dinners in silence.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

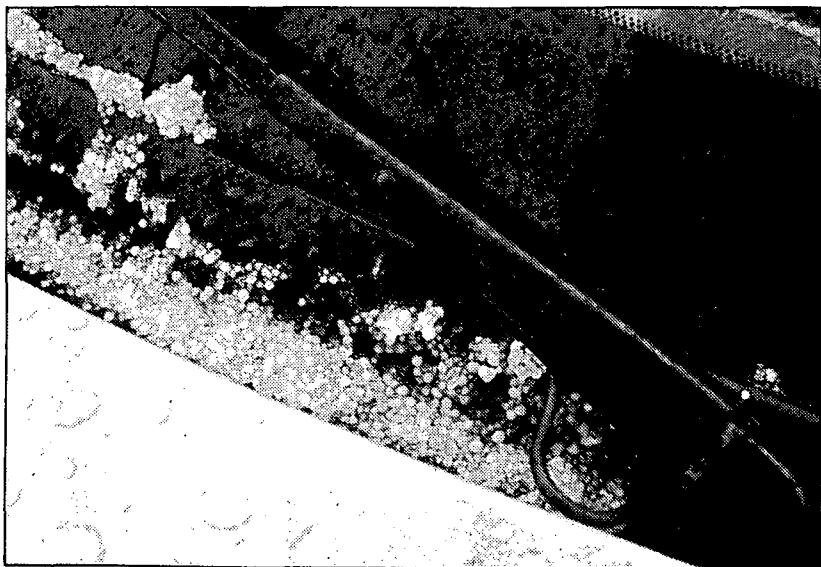


Photo by Stanley Schmidt

Rat-a-tat-tat. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

FICTION

— The Pigeon —

by Judith L. Post



Illustration by Judy Mitchell

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It was the perfect setup. The old lady lived in a huge three story Victorian in one of those old neighborhoods that still have status. Everything about the place, in the politest of terms, shouted, "Money!" The yard was beautifully landscaped. The driveway swept in a graceful curve to a brick sidewalk that led to the kind of deep, wraparound front porch that nobody builds any more. Wicker furniture was clustered in cosy seating arrangements along its length.

I reread the address in the newspaper clipping. Yup, this was the place. I'd gone to the library and looked it up in the city directory. Occupant: Madeline Parker. Age: seventy-three. Occupation: volunteer.

I smiled. No children, no husband. Just one lonely old woman who needed some live-in care.

I rang the bell.

"Coming," cried a reedy, high-pitched voice as feet shuffled toward the door. She opened it hesitantly, peeking out at me with watery blue eyes. "Yes?"

"My name is Hillie Johnson. I'm here about the ad you placed in the paper."

"Oh, that." She opened the door wider and motioned me in. "My nephew is always fussing at me. He thinks I'm getting

too old and rickety to care for myself."

I looked around the front parlor. It was disappointing, to say the least. The carpet had been expensive in its prime, but now it was worn and shabby. Everything about the room was a testament to neglect. The arms of the sofa had white stuffing poking from the edges. The flowered design was so faded it was barely discernible. The cushion of the easy chair drooped with sagging springs. I doubted if anyone used this room any longer. Maybe Mrs. Parker simply ignored it.

"What do you need to know, dear?" she asked, seating herself on the edge of a rocking chair that was drawn up to a long, narrow window.

"Have you hired anyone for the position yet?" I asked.

"Oh, no, of course not. Why would anyone want to live here?"

The interview wasn't going the way I'd expected. Mrs. Parker seemed like a sweet old woman, but I couldn't make up my mind if I thought she was all there or not. Maybe she was a rich eccentric, a little on the looney side, and that's why the nephew needed someone to keep tabs on her. If that was the case, why wasn't the nephew interviewing the applicants himself?

"Did your nephew place the ad in the paper?" I ventured.

"Phillip? No, no, he's much too busy."

"But you said—"

"I thought it might make Phillip happy," she explained. "He's constantly fretting about the way I do things. I'm the one who placed the ad."

I nodded. So . . . she wasn't a bit dim. Her nephew kept harping at her, so she placed the ad to get him off her back. Pretty shrewd, if you ask me. "Well, I came to apply for the job," I said, "but I see how things are. Thanks anyway."

As I turned to go, she said, "But, miss, are you telling me you're interested?"

I did my best imitation of a young girl in desperate need. Since I'm petite and look innocent, most people fall for it. They look at my heart-shaped face and big hazel eyes and think of a doll. I used to resent that. Now I use it for all it's worth.

"I'm new to South Bend," I said, "and I'm sort of low on money. I hoped I could live here for a while and maybe save a little."

Her soft, creased face puckered with sympathy. "Oh, you poor child, of course you can. Tell me, are you hungry? I could fix you some lunch."

I couldn't hide my surprise.

Not much throws me any more, but this old lady was throwing me one curve after another. "Aren't I supposed to take care of you?" I asked.

She waved a thin, veined hand. "Oh, pooh! I hate being fussed over. All you have to do is sweep and dust and make sure I turn the stove off. I forgot last month and almost burned the kitchen down." She sighed. "Phillip had a fit, but it's so easy to get busy and then little things slip your mind."

Was she for real? I couldn't quite get a fix on her, but there was no big hurry. I planned on staying with her about a month before I made my move. That way, she could be "robbed" after I'd become a dependable, respected member of the house. I'd work a couple more weeks, and then I'd get a letter from my mother. She'd want me to come home. She'd be sorry we argued and I'd run away. It was all her fault . . . or whatever sounded most convincing.

"I need to get my things," I said. "When would you like for me to start?"

"The sooner, the better," she told me. "Can you be back in time for supper? I eat at five thirty."

I went back to my hotel room and picked up the few things I'd brought with me. I always

travel light. There's no real reason to get attached to things now. I spend every fall and winter in a classroom, trying to get a degree. I spend my summers earning money for tuition. I took the bus to Mrs. Parker's house, arriving about five fifteen.

She answered the doorbell on the fourth ring. "I didn't mean to keep you waiting," she said, waving for me to shut the door and follow her, "but my old legs don't move too fast any more. I hope you're hungry. Supper's about ready."

I dropped my suitcases near the base of the wide center staircase and followed her to the back of the house. The place was in worse shape than I'd thought. Wallpaper drooped in loose strips near the ceiling. The tile flooring was the old mottled brown that used to be put in school buildings. When we left the hallway and entered the kitchen, things got worse. The walls were painted with a shiny mustard-colored enamel that's been outdated for the last few decades. White wooden cupboards stretched to the ceiling, and white Formica with gold speckles decorated the countertops.

"It's the pits," Mrs. Parker said, gauging my reaction correctly. "It hasn't been redone since Ira bought it years ago."

She looked around the kitchen critically. "His first wife had terrible taste, don't you think?"

I had to agree. "How long have you been a widow?" I asked her, wondering why she hadn't hired someone to update the place.

"It's been seventeen years now," she said without hesitation. "Ira was older than me, of course, and he died young. He was only sixty-one. His heart, you know. He was one of those driven businessmen." She led me to a small round table in the kitchen. The table was set for two. "Why don't you pour us each a glass of wine while I get the food? You do like wine, don't you?"

"Some," I said. I was more of a beer person myself, but I'd do whatever made the old woman happy.

"This is an excellent red," she assured me. "I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

I found the wine goblets and poured us each a glass while she busied herself at the stove. When we finally sat down, it was to a small pan of meatloaf, baked yams, and green beans. Fine with me, but not exactly aristocratic fare.

"I made it special," she said with a smile. "I thought you might be starving."

"It looks delicious," I replied, but I was surprised again.

Nothing about the inside of this house seemed to match the exterior.

"I have coffee to go with our dessert," she said.

I blinked. "You must have been cooking since the time I left."

"Yes, it's been so much fun. No one's been here for ages. It's so terribly dreary eating with the TV each night. I usually just pop a frozen dinner in the oven."

So that was the answer. She was alone and didn't go to much bother, but she seemed so cheerful and energetic that I couldn't picture her dawdling around all day, doing nothing.

"Do you go out a lot?" I asked.

"Not all that much any more." She sighed. "I don't drive. Ira's old car is in the garage, but it hasn't been started for a long time." She cocked her head and looked at me questioningly. "I don't suppose you drive, do you?"

"I have the opposite problem of yours. I have a license, but no car."

She chuckled. "Maybe you could try Ira's Lincoln tomorrow. It was his pride and joy. After he died, I went out and started it every Sunday for years. He always said that was good for a car, but lately I kind of lost heart. I'd pretty much decided I was stuck in this

house until they carted me out."

I stopped my fork in mid-air. "But what about a taxi?" I argued.

"Do you know how much that costs?" she countered. "I can barely make ends meet as is. If it weren't for Phillip, I'd be in the poorhouse."

"Your nephew, right?"

She gave a small grimace. "He calls himself that. Phillip is Ira's son from his first marriage. Poor Sarah died in childbirth, and Phillip was nearly eleven before Ira and I married. Phillip never did like the idea of his father's remarrying. I tried to win him over when he was a boy, but he didn't want any part of it. We got along all right, but there was never any warmth, you know. He told everyone that he was my nephew so that he wouldn't have to call me his mother."

"That's horrible!" The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Mrs. Parker smiled. "It's not all that bad. I had Ira for thirty-six years, you see, and he was the most wonderful man there ever was. I was only twenty when I married him; and Phillip being eleven, he didn't see much reason to listen to me." She paused and shook her head. "Phillip is a man of firm principles, though. Since his fa-

ther's death, he's thought of himself as the man of the family. He always believes in doing the right thing, so he comes to visit once a week."

Her voice gave her away. His visits were not something she looked forward to.

I finished my last bite of meatloaf and rose to clear the table.

"Does he know you've hired me?"

"Good gracious, no! He won't like it, either."

I ran hot water in the sink and added some detergent. "I thought he was worried about you."

Mrs. Parker gave an unlady-like snort. "He fusses and frets, but it's not me he's worried about. It's this house . . . and appearances. Appearances matter a lot to Phillip. He sees to it that the yard is mowed and the bushes pruned. He hired someone to paint the outside of the house three years ago. The old paint was beginning to peel, and what would the neighbors think?" She pushed herself from the table and poured herself another glass of wine. "Phillip worries about the Parker name. We have an image to keep up."

She looked at her dingy surroundings. "This is what he thinks of me."

For the first time I was be-

ginning to worry. Maybe Mrs. Parker didn't have anything of value after all. I never took anything big from other people—at least, not for them. The rich people have so much that some of them never even notice a missing trifle or two.

The way I see it, when they help me through college, they're only paying for their past sins. They wouldn't do it voluntarily, but maybe it helps even their tally sheets anyway. My mom and dad both worked hard for a living, putting in long hours at heavy factory jobs. When our town went bust, no one else wanted them. No one wanted to hire two middle-aged people with no skills. When I moved out, I know it made it easier for them.

It's not that I don't love them. I do, but they'd never understand. After all that's happened to them, after the system beat them into the dirt, they still believe in the good old work ethic. It doesn't look all that great to me. The rich people profit, and the poor people sweat; and when the rich people are through with you, they cast you out.

When I left Mom and Dad, I had a goal in mind. The great spoiled rich and the system that blessed them were going to put me through college. The only problem was that Mrs.

Parker might not be one of them.

"What will your nephew think of me?" I asked.

Mrs. Parker grinned, and her wrinkled face looked positively mischievous. "He'll hate you."

"Can he fire me?"

She finished her glass of wine. "No, as a matter of fact, he'll have to pay for you, I'm too poor."

I gaped.

"Don't worry, child. He won't like it, but he will. You can stay here as long as you like. When you have enough saved to get a place of your own, I'll understand."

I was beginning to feel like a real rat. Mrs. Parker had taken me in when she had all she could handle herself. She might have started out with a life of ease, but it sounded as if her husband's death had changed all that. Phillip, it seemed, had always been a pain.

Even I have a conscience. "Look, if this is going to get you in trouble with Phillip, I can find another job. This is only temporary for me. It might be permanent for you."

She laughed. "Young lady, I've been so sick of feeling sorry for myself lately, I really don't care. I'd rather be in an old people's home than spend any more time scrimping away in a big, fancy house."

There was no false bravado in her voice. I realized that Mrs. Parker and I had a lot in common. Neither one of us wanted to sit around soliciting pity for ourselves. We'd rather take a few risks and fail than give up meekly.

"So—when do I meet this Phillip?" I asked.

Mrs. Parker smiled. "That's my girl. He'll be here Friday. *Every* Friday," she stressed.

After dessert—apple crisp with vanilla ice cream—Mrs. Parker said, "Go upstairs and look around. Pick whichever room you want. I never go up there any more, too hard on the knees. I put a daybed in the library, and I spend most of my time in there. I have a color TV if you want to join me."

I thanked her, then carried my suitcases up the elegant staircase. I took my time going from room to room. There were five bedrooms on the second floor. It was easy to tell that the front corner one had been the master suite. An antique mahogany double bed was centered against its far wall. A makeup table with a marble top and triple mirrors was cluttered with pictures of what had to be Ira and Mrs. Parker when they were younger. A long, low chest of drawers dominated the third wall. I opened a few draw-

ers. Potpourri scented the yellowed lingerie inside, but there was nothing of value anywhere. No jewelry, no heirlooms.

The last bedroom on the left must have been Phillip's. It was painted blue for a boy, and a sturdy desk sat under the window. A shelf held old trophies for baseball and tennis. A narrow staircase led to a huge, open space on the third floor, obviously the playroom. A train set wound its way past an Erector set and an old telescope. Stuffed animals cluttered the top of a bright red toybox.

I chose the front room opposite Ira and Mrs. Parker's. It must have been used for guests. It had a Hollywood bed and a chaise longue, both covered with brightly flowered chintz. The windows were draped with matching material, and the wooden floor peeked around the edges of a muted Oriental rug. It was beautiful, dusty, and in need of a good cleaning, but a cosy, comfortable room.

I found all the cleaning supplies I needed in the bathroom down the hall. An hour later my room was spic and span. I threw open the upstairs windows to air the place out and began hanging my clothes in the closet. By the time I went back downstairs to find Mrs. Parker, I was moved in.

S taying with Mrs. Parker wasn't like anything I'd ever done before. We did everything together. When I started breakfast, she came to help. When I washed dishes, she dried. If I scrubbed the kitchen floor, she sat at the table and polished silver, chatting with me while we worked. The woman wasn't senile or frail. She was just plain lonely. I wondered why such a friendly, interesting person was so starved for company. When we took our first drive in Ira's old Lincoln, I thought the old lady was going to burst with happiness.

"Oh dear, look at that! The movie theater was bought out by a video shop. I've read about those new VCR's. I asked Phillip about them, but he said I wouldn't like one. He said all the new movies are nothing but trash."

"I think there are quite a few good movies out on the market," I told her. "What type do you like?"

"You'll think me an old fool, but I always loved comedies and romances. I can remember the Spencer Tracy-Katharine Hepburn shows, and then there was that handsome Rock Hudson with that sweet little Doris Day." She sighed. "I suppose everything's much more so-

phisticated now. Times were so much simpler back then."

I couldn't help laughing. "Things haven't changed all that much. People are basically the same."

"You don't think I'm hopelessly outdated?" Mrs. Parker asked. "Phillip always treats me like an old relic."

I shook my head. "Let's find out," I said, and on impulse, I pulled into a shopping mall.

"Whatever are you doing?" Mrs. Parker asked.

"VCR's don't cost that much any more," I told her. "Let's buy one."

She grew flustered. "But I can't. I've probably given you the wrong impression, hiring you and all, but I really must budget very carefully. If it weren't for Phillip—"

"Nuts to Phillip!" I said, tired of the man. "I'm buying the VCR. When I leave, I'll take it with me. How's that?"

"But my dear—"

"How much are you paying me a week?" I countered.

"A hundred and fifty dollars," she said. "That's what we agreed upon, and it's fair. No one should work for less than that."

I smiled. "Then we'll spend my first week's earnings on the VCR. That way, I'll be able to enjoy my evenings more while I stay with you."

"Are you sure?"

I pulled her from the car. "I'm positive."

When I was driving her home with the VCR and two rented tapes, it occurred to me that I'd blown my own money on a lady I was casing to rob, and I promised myself I'd make it up. The old woman had to have some valuables somewhere. Once I found them, I'd take what I needed to cover my expense. Mrs. Parker would enjoy a VCR more than something wrapped away in mothballs anyway.

That night we ate our supper in the library while we watched *Moonstruck* and *Always*. Mrs. Parker loved them both.

"I don't think we should tell Phillip about this when he comes tomorrow," she said. "Explaining about you will be hard enough." She eyed me shrewdly. "Actually, I think tomorrow would be a good day for you to do the grocery shopping. That way, you won't be here when Phillip comes."

I nodded, smiling. Mrs. Parker most certainly wasn't the helpless old lady Phillip thought she was.

As a matter of fact, however, I was beginning to wonder about her. I'd been in the house a week by then, and there was definitely something fishy about the place. When you

work a job long enough, you get a feel for it, almost a gut-level intuition. Something wasn't adding up right at the Parker place. For one thing, for being a poor old lady, she got way too much mail. Every day we walked to the mailbox and brought back a stack of advertisements and catalogues. Posh mail order companies don't send ads to poor old ladies on Social Security. She got all kinds of investment brochures, too. Odd, hmm? Something wasn't right.

For another thing, the old lady was a dear, but she never had any company. Not a soul. It made me wonder. Either a whole lot of people thought she had money when she didn't, or my first impression was right and Mrs. Parker was a rich old broad who stashed her loot somewhere and pretended to be penniless.

Seeing as how Mrs. Parker's financial state was important to me, I decided to look into it harder.

The grocery list she gave me the next day was absolutely pitiful. Rethinking the meals we'd had lately, I realized that Mrs. Parker stretched everything as far as she possibly could. We had noodles with just enough beef for flavoring. We had rice with a small amount

of chopped chicken in it. For lunches, we had egg salad sandwiches and big pots of soup.

She watched my face as I read her small list.

"I tried to tell you that my resources are somewhat limited," she said, almost apologizing. "My Ira was a wonderful man, you see, but he wasn't quite as wonderful with money. He didn't invest wisely, so after he died, every year his stocks and things earned less. Some of them even went under. Phillip did his best to explain the situation to me, but Ira always handled our money so I'm afraid I didn't understand it very well. Things got so bad that Phillip comes every Friday now to gather my bills and such and make sure everything gets paid. If it weren't for him, I'd probably be out on the street."

I suddenly felt sorry for her. Whether she was truly poor or not, she thought she was, and she was suffering because of it. "But surely you have friends," I said.

Her blue eyes sparkled. "Ira and I used to entertain every weekend. We'd serve mountains of shrimp cocktail and have five course meals for our guests. We were always on the go, invited here and there, but I had to start turning people down when they'd invite me to

lunch or out to eat. I didn't have the money to meet them at the club or to pay for my meal, and if they invited me to their house, I'd have to return the favor." She sighed. "How could I? Our friends wouldn't be pleased with potato soup and Saltine crackers."

I don't know how to explain it, but my heart ached. My parents had lost everything they owned, but they'd taken it on the chin and preached the old motto, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." They'd knuckled down and worked harder, and they'd expected us to help out. I'd waited tables all through high school, but it was never enough. According to my parents, I didn't know what it was like to put in twelve hour days, to dig ditches, or to clean toilets for a living. No matter how much I suffered, my parents could always suffer more until I got tired of the contest.

Mrs. Parker had lost everything, too, but she was different. She still enjoyed life, and she still cared about people. I wondered about that, how people could experience the same thing and react to it so differently. I'd let Mom and Dad's loss make me bitter. I hadn't realized how hardened I'd become until I met Mrs. Parker.

"You'd better go, dear," she

said then, "or Phillip will get here and catch you."

That was warning enough for me. I took the grocery list and left.

I spent more on groceries than she'd given me. Peaches and apricots were in season, so I bought a half dozen of each. The bakery had a sale on Boston cream pies, so I bought one of those. I always liked having popcorn or ice cream when I watched TV in the evenings, so I bought some of those.

When I unloaded the groceries, Mrs. Parker oohed and aahed like a small child at Christmas. I saved the best for last. "Lunch," I said, and pulled out a pound carton of cold, peeled shrimp and a bottle of cocktail sauce.

"Hillie!" she sighed. "How wonderful!"

As we sat down to eat, I asked, "How did your visit with Phillip go?"

She looked downright sheepish, like a naughty child caught in the act. "He wasn't too happy about anyone's staying here with me until I told him that he needn't worry about you, that you couldn't stick your nose into Parker business because . . . because, well, I told him that you were retarded."

"Retarded?" I stared.

"Nothing else would do," she

admitted. "I told him that my joints were getting stiff and it was harder for me to move about, but he only scoffed at that. Then I said that the house was too big for me, that maybe I should sell it and move to a nursing center. He didn't like that idea at all, but he still didn't think I needed a housekeeper. He asked all kinds of things about you, and when I told him you were young and new to South Bend, he got downright edgy. 'I don't want any gossip spreading about our family,' he insisted. 'Who knows what harebrained ideas a young girl like that might get?' And that's when I told him you needed me as much as I needed you, that you were retarded."

"And he liked that?"

"Oh, immensely."

"Hmm." Phillip Parker was more concerned about his image than I'd thought. Maybe he didn't like the idea that someone might tell the world that his poor stepmother lived close to poverty while her dear, rich "nephew" lived very well indeed. I knew he was rich because I'd looked up his address in the directory. No poor people live in Coventry Hills. It made me curious. "What if he wants to meet me?" I asked.

"No need to worry," she said, slicing the Boston cream pie. "I

told him that you were excruciatingly shy and the least little thing upset you."

I smiled. Mrs. Parker was much more devious than I'd guessed. I admired her a great deal.

I'd been with Mrs. Parker for nearly a month, and I should have been disappointed. I had made a great show of "setting the house to rights," as she put it, cleaning and dusting from the attic to the basement, and I'd yet to find the first valuable anything. I'd thumped walls for secret hiding places and looked for a safe. I'd watched the mail and kept my ears open. All with no results.

I didn't care, though. I was enjoying myself more than I ever had.

One day over lunch, she said, "You know, I've blabbed practically my entire history, but I know hardly anything about you, Hillie."

I was expecting her to ask. Most people do, eventually. I had a pat answer I always gave, but it was getting harder and harder to lie to Mrs. Parker. "Well," I said with a deep sigh, "I was going to college until my money ran out." That much was true.

"What were you taking?" she asked.

"Photojournalism." Still true.

"Dear me, I'm not sure I understand."

"I've studied photography and newspaper reporting," I explained. "Some day, I'd like to travel all over the world and earn money by taking pictures of the places I go to and writing articles about them."

"That sounds delightful."

I smiled. "Do you like to travel?"

"I've never gone anyplace exotic," she said, "but Ira and I used to drive to the east coast each summer, and once we took an airplane to California."

"I've never been anyplace exotic either," I confessed, "but I'd love to see most of the places I've read about."

She reached across and took my hand. "You'd be perfect for the job. You're so brave and competent. When will you have the money to go back and finish your degree?"

"Soon," I said.

"That's wonderful, child. You have your whole life ahead of you; I know I'll be proud that I knew you for a short while."

I swallowed hard.

It was at the beginning of the month, when the air was hot and humid, that I got my first break. I held a small stack of envelopes in my hand, all from

prestigious companies and looking very much like quarterly stock dividends.

"What are these?" I asked Mrs. Parker, laying them on the kitchen table.

She glanced at the envelopes. "Bills," she said. "Thank goodness Phillip takes care of them."

"They're addressed to you."

She sighed. "It's a dreary task, but it has to be done. Phillip sits behind his father's big walnut desk, and I sit across from him. He has me sign each one of these so that no one comes to shut my gas and lights off. That way it's legal."

"Who told you that?"

"Why, Phillip, of course. He's been helping me with my money ever since his father died. I didn't even know how to balance a checkbook. He's a dull boy, but dutiful."

So that was it. Mrs. Parker wasn't eccentric, and she wasn't destitute. Her nephew was a lying, thieving worm.

I could feel the fury rise inside me. Now, I know that I went to Mrs. Parker's house with the idea of ripping her off, but I've never ever in my entire life left anyone destitute. I never even took anything that was a family keepsake. I needed cash, and most rich people have more than they'll ever use. As far as I'm concerned,

they rob it from the poor. I simply reclaimed it as mine.

I didn't say anything to Mrs. Parker, but I was mad as hell and I've never believed in being a martyr. I'd taken four years of journalism in high school and three more in college. If I didn't know how to nail down a case by then, I'd wasted my time.

"Will Phillip come today to get these?" I asked.

"On Wednesday?" Mrs. Parker shook her head. "He only comes on Friday."

I seated her in the recliner in the library and said, "I'll put these on the desk in the parlor for you. Would you like to rent a movie this afternoon?"

"That would be lovely."

"Would you like to drive to the video shop with me?" I asked.

"No, what if I fix lunch while you go?"

"Sounds great." I made my plans carefully. I didn't want to upset her if I didn't have to. I went to the video shop and rented a classic, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Then I went to the liquor store and bought an expensive bottle of white wine. I knew Mrs. Parker very well by then. After eating a light lunch with a glass of wine and watching a movie, she'd be ready for a nap. When she fell asleep, I'd have time to make

the phone calls I needed to make.

By three thirty, she was sound asleep. The first thing I did was track down Phillip Parker's line of work. He'd made that easy for me. It seemed that Phillip had already gone to great pains to let everyone know that he'd hired a housekeeper for his poor, doddering "aunt." All I had to say was that I worked for Mrs. Parker and that she was slightly confused about a letter she'd received in the mail, and people were happy to assist me. It seemed that Phillip had been telling everyone for quite some time that Mrs. Parker was a senile invalid who should be put in a nursing center, but she was too attached to her house to go. He had received the status of near sainthood for his infinite patience in dealing with her, and people could hardly believe his generosity when he'd hired me to live with the old woman so she could stay in familiar surroundings.

Of course, he hadn't mentioned the fact that he thought I was a dimwit who wouldn't interfere in his business. He wouldn't want that known, so people weren't surprised when I sounded like a competent, efficient caretaker. When I explained that Mrs. Parker had

accidentally thrown away the list of important numbers Phillip had left me, they answered my questions readily.

By the time I'd made a few phone calls, I had learned that Phillip Parker was a stockbroker with a respected company in South Bend, that the Parker family had always done business with the Cityville Bank, and that sixty-four-year-old Parker was a highly respected member of the country club, an avid golfer, and a devoted church member. He'd never married or had children (probably because he was too devoted to himself, I thought), but he had always been a loving nephew to Mrs. Parker. When I talked to the last person on my list and hung up, I was about ready to throw up. Phillip Parker couldn't be any more pretentious or full of himself if he tried—and I was pretty sure he made a real effort. The next thing I did was call the Cityville Bank and tell the manager that I was Mrs. Parker's housekeeper and that the old dear's TV set had recently died. She'd like to purchase a new one, but she couldn't remember where she put her bank book. Could she afford one?

The manager laughed. "Phillip told me that Madeline was getting addled in her old age, but believe me when I tell you

that Madeline can afford almost anything her heart desires. She hasn't touched Ira's capital for the last six years."

"The poor thing." I tried to sound properly sympathetic.

"Yes, no one's seen her for ages. Phillip says she's become an absolute recluse, that she makes Howard Hughes look like a social butterfly." He paused slightly. "If you'd known her when she was younger, you wouldn't believe it. Madeline was one of the most charming hostesses South Bend's ever seen."

I thanked him for his time and hung up.

Phillip Parker was lower than slime, and I wanted to see him pay. My mind reeled with scenes of vengeance, but then reason overcame my passion. Would Mrs. Parker want Phillip publicly humiliated? Was she the type of person who'd relish revenge? The more I thought about it, the less I thought she'd like the idea.

In the end I decided on a more rational course of action. I took the stock dividends to Mrs. Parker when she woke from her nap and explained to her what I thought was happening.

"Phillip has been taking all of your money for years now. You've been rich all along, but Phillip's been using your cash to support his own lifestyle."

Mrs. Parker sat silent for a moment, stunned.

"You could call the police and have him arrested," I said, "or you could handle this privately."

Her blue eyes sparkled with anger, but her lips twisted with pain. "I always knew he resented his father's marrying me. I never realized he resented me this much."

"Who knows if it's resentment or greed? He's never married, has he? Phillip sounds like a man who only cares about himself."

Mrs. Parker frowned. "He was always a selfish little boy, completely spoiled after his mother's death. I suppose he hasn't changed."

"The point is," I said, taking her hand, "you aren't poor. You have more money than you need, but Phillip's keeping it for himself."

"But he didn't take my savings," she pointed out.

"How could he without calling attention to himself? To get power of attorney, he'd be forced to have you ruled mentally incompetent. No judge would buy that, and then they might look into some of your other financial matters. This way, he simply *told* you that you were poor. Your money stayed in the bank, and when you die, he'll inherit it all."

Her shoulders sagged. She looked beaten. "My own flesh and blood."

I shrugged. "I figured you for the type who'd always look at the bright side. You don't have to pinch any more. You can fix your house, hire a chauffeur, and do as you please."

"I can, can't I?" she asked, raising her chin.

"You can call the shots. What would you like to do?"

She leaned back in her recliner, considering. "First, I'd like to talk to Phillip."

Phillip stumbled all over himself but couldn't deny the truth. He made no apologies for what he'd done. If anything, he was simply belligerent that he'd been caught. If there was any chance of Mrs. Parker's forgiving and forgetting, he let her know that that would be beneath him. He'd robbed her for all these years, and he was glad of it.

I sat biting my tongue, waiting for Mrs. Parker's reaction. I should have known she wouldn't let me down.

She looked her insolent stepson up and down, studied his tailored linen suit, his silk shirt and Gucci shoes. Her eyes darted to the thick gold watch on his wrist and the Volvo parked outside the window in the driveway.

"Phillip, you're a conceited fool," she said, "but I loved your father, so I'd rather not make all of this public. Some of it will slip out, of course. When I start going out once more, people will know that I'm not frail or senile. Unless you want your church friends and business acquaintances to know that you're nothing more than a loose-fingered, lying thief, we need to come to an understanding. You will never visit this house again. I'm giving all of my financial affairs to Gar-ringer at Cityville Bank to manage, with strict orders that you will have no recourse to my money. Finally, you will donate twenty thousand dollars to the Old People's Home."

"What?" His face grew red.

"You've stolen a great deal more than that from me, and it's taught me what it feels like to have to scrape and scrimp. It's demeaning. No one should be put in those circumstances. You'll see to it that the old and needy of South Bend are treated with dignity and respect."

"If you think for one minute—"

"It's your choice," she said, cutting him off. "It's that or I call the *Gazette* and explain the entire matter to them. What will your country club friends think of you then?"

He pressed his lips together in anger. "Is that all?"

"No. I think you're a selfish, pathetic human being and I don't like you. Don't ever push me again, Phillip. This is the last time I'll think of you as family." With that, she rose and left the room. "Would you see Phillip out, Hillie? He's leaving now," she said.

As we walked to the front door, Phillip hissed, "You did this, didn't you? It's all your doing."

"Yes, thank you," I told him, smiling. "You're not related to me, and I think you're lower than sewer sludge. The only reason I'm keeping my mouth shut is that I like your mother."

"So that's it," he said with a shrewd look. "You're going to fleece the old broad now."

"You're a sorry bastard," I told him. "I'm glad we never had the chance to really get to know each other."

I opened the door for him, and he stalked to his car.

Mrs. Parker had a lot of fun for the next few weeks. She hired men to redo the entire interior of her house. She had me drive her to a different restaurant for lunch every day. She visited old friends that she hadn't seen for ages.

When the end of August came, though, she began to

brood a bit. Finally, one morning over tea and toast, I said, "What is it?"

She sighed. "Money isn't everything, you know."

"It helps, though," I told her.

Laughing, she said, "Did you know that there's a very good college not very far from here?"

"An expensive college," I said.

She shrugged her bony shoulders. "What fun is it having money when you're old and frail if you don't have someone to share it with?"

I began to shake my head.

"Don't stumble on your own pride, girl," Mrs. Parker warned. "I'd give you whatever you need, and you know that, but I'd rather keep you here. I was thinking . . ." She paused.

"Yes?"

"A photojournalist would probably be a lot safer if she took an ancient relative around the country with her, like a chaperone, you know. There are lots of places I'd like to see before I'm stuck in a wheelchair or bedridden."

"What are you saying?"

She sighed. "Do I have to spell it out? I don't have any children of my own, no grandchildren, no family. I'd like to think of you as the granddaughter I never had."

Tears filled my eyes. I'm not usually a pushover, and I rarely cry, but Mrs. Parker had touched some part of me I didn't even know existed.

"You could live with me while you finish college, and I'd expect you to bring your friends home, too. What do you say?"

"I was going to rob you when I took this job."

She took a deep breath and studied me hard for a minute, then began to laugh. "Well, too bad for you, but my nephew beat you to it."

I could see the humor in that.

"You're a good girl," she said. "How about it? Could you put up with the likes of me a while longer?"

I hugged her gently. "I think we're a lot alike."

"Oh, do you now?" Her blue eyes twinkled. "Then the world had better watch out, hadn't it?"

UNSOLVED

by
Walter Shepherd

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

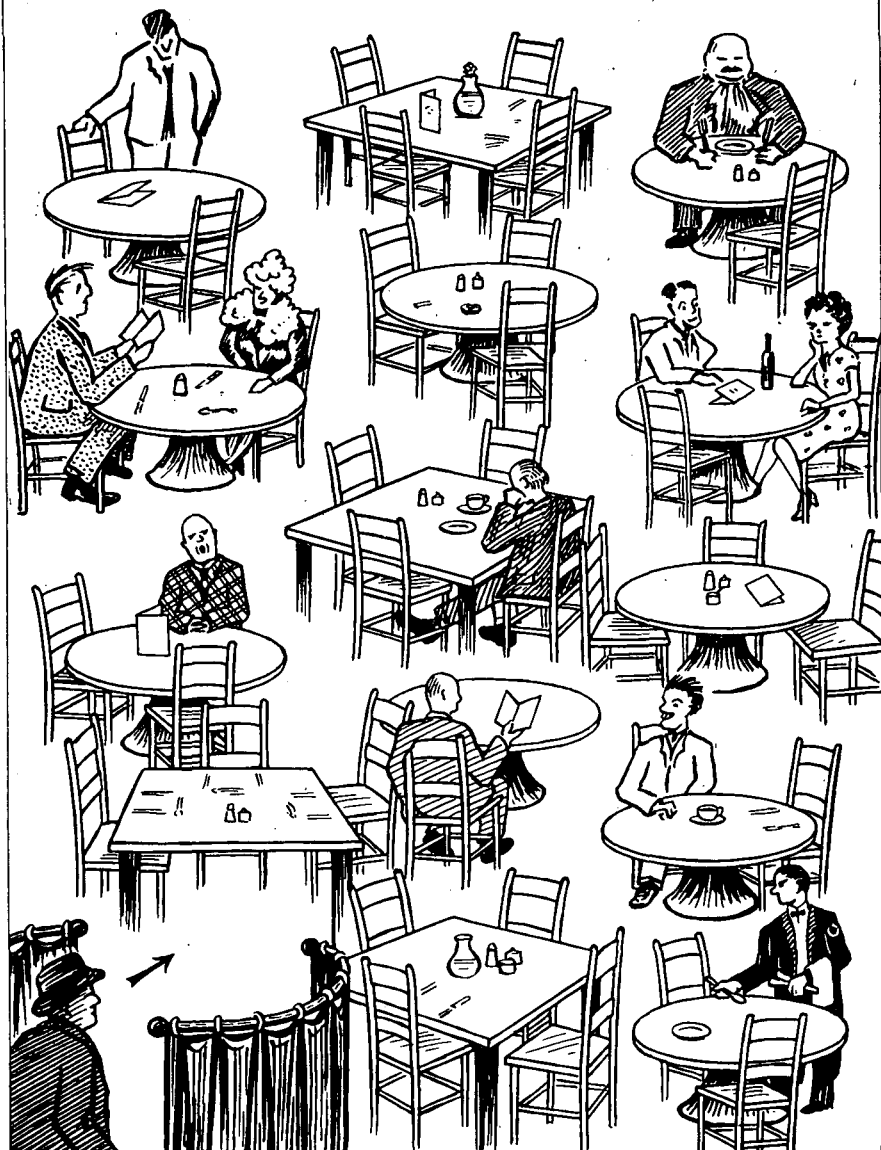
The answer will appear in the April issue.

Having arranged to disclose some secret information to Sergesuit Spykovsky over lunch at the Wonder Bar Grill, double agent Shady Brace had difficulty in finding the right table. Spykovsky was sitting at the top (right) table for two, but Brace actually visited all the other tables before finding him. In doing this, he sometimes had to retrace his path between the tables, but he never needed to cross his own tracks. What was his most likely route?

NOTE: To "visit" a table means to touch the *single* line edge of the tabletop. You must follow an open path between tables, being unable to pass where the way is blocked by chairs, tables, or people.

See page 146 for the solution to the February puzzle.

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Where Angels Fear

by P. K. Schossau

I didn't know today would turn out so crummy—but of course the kid knew.

He must have, by the way he sat staring out the windshield. And by the way he had his feet planted against the floor of the car like he was pushing invisible brakes.

"It's another murder, isn't it?" he says to me.

I said, "You know they're not gonna tell *me* anything. The captain just told us to get over there and investigate."

And like he forgot he already said it, the kid said, "It's a murder, isn't it?"

I was surprised. "Look," I said, "what difference does it make?"

You're gonna go walk around the place and tell me what you see, and then you can go home and forget it until it's time to testify. No big deal—just do your job.”

“I don't want to see anything.” Just like that. *Anything*, he said. I was starting to get a bad feeling.

That's when I noticed that up ahead, along with all the black-and-whites and the gawkers, the ambulance was still there. Backed up to the curb, back door open. Waiting.

Damn them, anyway. They know I don't want to take these kids in before the mess is cleared out.

So I sat there cussing to myself, and then I looked over and saw the way he was sitting there. Tall and gawky as he is, he had a look that made me think of a little cat held up by the scruff of the neck, all round blue eyes and empty head.

So I figured sitting there waiting was as bad as doing it. We got out and slipped under the cordon to go up to the house. The kid was moving sorta slow, but he went.

Lucky us, that jerk Guyer was stationed at the front door. Something about the guy I can't stand. But I try to act like we're all on the same side, if you know what I mean. I said, “Hey, Guyer,” real friendly. “Tell 'em to clear out, would you?”

I remember how Guyer stared at the kid, stared with that lip of his curled up like he smelled something bad. Finally he got around to pulling the radio off his belt.

“Lieutenant,” he says, “we got the psi-freak out front.”

Just like that, right in front of us. Jeez. I didn't have to check to know the kid looked like somebody who'd just had a toe mashed.

Well, we stood there awhile, me digging my finger around in my ear to look casual and imagining how someday Guyer would be begging us to help him out of a spot. Once I checked out of the corner of my eye and thought the kid seemed okay now. Leaning there against the house, with his eyes closed and that pale skin of his, he looked like a marble statue of a kid thinking real hard about some place better than this dump of a neighborhood. I was glad his eyes were closed when the uniforms, lab guys, and ambulance people started filing out; we got a few dirty looks.

Finally Guyer grunted at me, and I nudged the kid. It took him a minute to move, so I said, “Let's go.”

Maybe I sounded kinda mad, but that was so he'd know I wasn't fooling. We don't need somebody like Guyer to think we don't like the job.

The house had that stink about it—grease, stale smoke, booze—that always takes me back to when I was a kid. There was the usual falling-apart junk furniture, the floor all curled up at the edges, a track worn across the middle. Nothing special. I got my notes and recorder out and started the recorder up. “Eighteen May,” I said for the recorder, “Bartell and Grady at—uh, 490 Watkins. P.D.A. request by Captain C. Duprie.”

I wasn’t looking at the kid. I didn’t know for a minute he was still standing in the doorway. I remember saying, “Okay, lead the way,” and hearing him say,

“No.”

I looked over at him—just looked, you know, while I’m trying to figure out just what to say to him, because he’s never ever told me no before. Then he gets this scared look on his face and says, “I’m coming.” Huffy, like he thought I was gonna hit him or something.

He knows I’d never hit him.

I followed him into the kitchen. It was about the same as the rest of the place, plus scuzzy dishes piled all around and that boozy sweet smell of food gone bad.

He was standing there staring out the window—wasn’t nothing but the wall of another house there, nothing to look at—so I suggested, “Why don’t you try sitting down for a minute?” You know, trying to keep things moving.

The bump in his throat jerked up and down, and his eyes slid around.

“No,” he said again, real faint. I didn’t know what to say. But then, almost like he hadn’t heard himself, he started wandering around the kitchen, stopping here and there to touch stuff.

I hated to see him touching anything; the place was pretty dirty, and those long white fingers of his were picking it up. But I could tell by the look on his face that he was listening hard now; like somebody was whispering something real soft in his ear, so soft he couldn’t quite catch it.

He went along one wall, around the table, past the sink. When he put his hands out to a closed door at one end of the kitchen, all of a sudden he jerked back like the thing burned him.

Good, I’m thinking. He’s onto it now.

But it wasn’t the usual routine, him going on about a lot of people and feelings and stuff. This time he just stood there sagged against the cupboard, real weak, his face gone gray or more like green, and I could see he was gonna throw up.

It's embarrassing to explain that kind of thing to the guys outside. I mean, I don't need it. So I reached out and grabbed his arm and jerked him hard away from the door.

"Something through there?"

He was looking pretty bad so I shoved him into a chair and pushed his head down and asked again, "Is there something through that door?"

Leaning over with his head between his knees, he shook his head a little and said to the floor, "Up."

I looked up at the ceiling. Took me a minute to realize he was talking about upstairs.

"Okay," I says, real patient. "You rest a little bit, and we'll go on up."

Right away he tried to lift his head, to give me this sideways look like I can't even describe. "No, Gene, *please*—"

I'm a reasonable man. I pulled out a chair and sat down. "It's okay. You just had a shock. Take a minute, and you'll feel better." And I'm thinking, what kind of mess is upstairs, anyway? I've never seen him act like this, not this bad.

He put his head down again. He was quiet for a while, until I could tell by his breathing that he was feeling better. When he finally sat up, he at least looked like he wouldn't pass out.

"Anything you want to tell me before we go up there?" I asked him. "Did you get any names or anything?"

"No," he said. He looked real tired.

"Okay. Listen, I'll go first."

I went back through the front room to the stairway, trying not to look back to make sure he followed me.

It was narrow and dark and dusty smelling, going up those stairs, with the steps creaking and sagging under our weight. We climbed into a haze of cigarette smoke and chemical fumes and sweat.

I was so sure it was gonna be bad, I couldn't quite believe there was no mess at all. There was just the gurney sitting there in the hallway, with everything all tucked away nice and neat under the black plastic. And I said out loud, "So hey—not so bad!" to sort of encourage the kid.

But, of course, what I see and what he sees are two different things.

He came into the hallway awful slow, looking everywhere but at the gurney, his head sweeping back and forth that way like

blind folks do. I could hear him panting like he'd been running. He walks past the gurney once, then back, and says in a shaky voice, "Two people. Both men. One young, one not."

A little light coming through a doorway showed sweat sparkling on his forehead. "Wait—three. A woman. They're old . . ."

It always confuses me when he gets into it like this and I haven't caught up yet. "The people?" I says.

"The woman's traces. They're nearly gone." He said it sharp and angry. Funny kid, acts real impatient and sort of—ah, arrogant—yeah, arrogant when he's onto strong traces. You have to understand he's not like that, mostly. It's just like he *knows* so much that the traces are saying I guess he can't believe I don't know it, too.

I jerked my head at the gurney. "Which one is that?"

"The older man." The kid looked around with that funny way about his eyes, like he can't really see with them. "His traces are—confused."

"Drunk a lot?" I guessed.

"Yeah. Maybe." After a long piece of quiet he tells me, "I wish he'd stop crying."

His voice was different. He sorta slurred the words.

I tried to fit into it. "What are you to him?"

Nothing came. Me and the body in the bag waited, each of us holding our breath his own way. Finally—

"I'll always hate him."

"Why?" Nothing. I prodded him again, "What're you mad at him for?"

All kinds of feelings were twitching around on his face. "Her," he says.

All of a sudden there were big pools of tears in his eyes. I waited, staring at those little shaking teardrops getting ready to spill over, but he didn't say anything. Finally I asked him, "What is she to you? What is she to *him*?"

"My—his—" he stuttered, and I could tell I'd said the wrong thing; he'd lost the traces. Then he looked over at me, really seeing me this time. His voice was real low like he didn't want someone close by to hear. "She belonged to both of them."

I wanted to cheer things up a little, so I laughed. "Guaranteed to start trouble."

He gave me this look of disgust and turned away to head into the nearest room.

It had a bed that wasn't made and a dresser cluttered with a bunch of little stuff. The kid went over to a closet that didn't have a door and started touching the sleeves of some dresses hanging there.

"Her traces are very faint. She's been gone a long time," he tells me.

"Try the man's clothes," I suggested, watching from behind. He'd touched only a few more when he jerked his hand back.

"Whaddya get?"

"Dead."

"Who?"

The kid said, "Of course she's dead." He had this real snotty voice that didn't sound much like him. "You know why better than anyone."

I didn't want to pull him out of it again, so I just kept my mouth shut and waited.

The kid was staring at something between him and the closet. Then a shaking came over him, a sort of trembling, and then it's like he's wearing a mask. You know, a real twisted face, full of old hate. His voice—his whole body—was vibrating like a jack-hammer. Tears are rolling down his face when he yells at me, "Your goddam drinking, and your lying, and her loving you all these years—you bastard, with your crying and whining and pretending to be sick, ever since I was old enough to know what a lazy drunk was—you let her love you until she didn't have anything left for living. . . . I shoulda done it before—"

Then the words stopped coming.

The shaking had stopped, and for some reason he was looking real hard at me. I said to him, "What, kid?"

And he just kept looking at me. It reminded me of how he looks in court, all calm and blank-faced. How he looks sitting alone in there telling in his soft kid's voice just how the whole thing happened while the judge and everybody stares at him like he was some kind of zoo animal, except for me, waiting in the back looking forward to being done for the day so the two of us can say t'hell with it and go home and watch a little TV until the next time. . . .

The kid spun around like somebody had jerked his leash and hurried out.

I followed at my own speed to see what would happen next.

But the kid wasn't in the hallway. And he wasn't in the next room. Or, I found out after a minute, anywhere below.

I eventually got back to the front door and asked out loud, of anybody within earshot, "Where'd the kid go?" I was scanning the bunch of people hanging around near the porch, the cars scattered here and there in the street.

One of the ambulance drivers jerked her thumb. "Ran that way."

"Ran?" I says, feeling sick.

"Ran."

I start for my car, but somebody sings out, "Hey, Bartell, any prizes for your freak show today?"

I turned around to look at Guyer. For a minute I didn't give a rat's ass whether he thought we were on the same side or not. So I gave my recorder a good hard throw at him and said, "You can take this to your lieutenant, or you can shove it, Guyer. I don't care which."

I think I was already in my car before the jerk could come up with another smart-ass remark.

It's a pretty place. A big pink-white house that rambles all over, with a white iron fence keeping it off by itself, all pretty and lonesome. I always liked the way the driveway has little plants along the edge, and the way the lawn slopes real easy down to the river. It'd be a good place for kids, I always think. Just the kind of place kids would love.

I could see him ahead of me, sprinting up the driveway. Once in a while there'd be a sound like choking come out of him. I slipped through the gate after him but then cut across the yard under the big willow tree, so I was up pretty close to the house by the time he got there.

But the teacher lady was outside like maybe she knew he was coming, so I couldn't stop him from getting to her. He threw his arms around her, laughing and crying at the same time. I just stood there cussing under my breath, hating it like hell and knowing I had to just wait it out.

He could hardly talk for crying; made my throat hurt just to hear it. "Oh, Rachel," he says, "it's so awful—"

She pushed him away and gave him a good look, that face of hers all kind and soft but sort of closed up. The kid must have noticed it because he asked her, "Are you all right?"

She said, "I'm fine. Now, Phillip, tell me why you're here."

You could see he was too shocked to talk for a minute. Then he said, "I've come home." Like she and I knew he would.

"Rachel," he says, "are you afraid the police will be angry?"

She shook her head and looked out way past him for a minute, so I stepped back behind the tree so she wouldn't see me. I heard her say, "Sit down here," and the next time I looked they were sitting on one of those pretty curlicue white benches, with about three feet of empty between them. She says in this soft little sing-song voice like she's teaching a class, "Phillip, what is your purpose in this world?"

I could see he was confused. "Why—to bring the truth."

"That's correct," she goes, nice and proper. "You are an Angel of Truth, sent from Heaven to shame the Devil. There is no weakness in your Word."

He nodded his head up and down, but he had this frown. "Yes, but—"

She kept going. "You've brought Truth to the world, have you not?"

I'm thinking, that he has, teacher lady. Lots of it.

"I—yes," he says.

"You've shared with Humankind your special gifts?"

"Yes . . ."

"And because of what you do, Evildoers are punished without error?"

By this time his head was drooping so low he was staring at his feet. "Yes, ma'am."

"Well, then." She gives this satisfied little nod. "We are both fulfilling our destinies, you and I," she says. "This is our greatest happiness in life. You have no need to come back."

He starts stuttering, "But—I never thought I'd have to *feel* it all—the anger—the sickness, and—and *fear*—please, don't make me . . . I'll work! I'll pay my own way! I know I'm not a child any more—"

But she held a hand out. You can bet she didn't quite touch him, although it almost seemed like she would. "You can't be *here*—not with the children."

"Why not?"

That face of hers. I bet there wasn't a saint in history had a more holy-looking face.

"Phillip," she says, "my children—" Hear that, *my children*? "My children must have the chance to grow up first. Without knowing the kind of things you've seen. You're filled with them now. Just being with you is—painful. For me, as it would be for them."

It knocked the wind right out of him. He stared at her for a while, stared with his mouth hanging open, blinking hard like it might help him to see what she meant. Then he knew.

"But *I* am one of your children—what about *me*? What about *me*?"

She just shook her head real sad-like and told him, "You're grown. Your destiny is to see the Truth. It is your Gift. You are an Angel—"

"But I don't *want* to see the truth!" he whispered. I could barely hear him.

She shook her head and told him, "The psi-sense exists to help the world."

"But I *can't* help—I can't *help*. All I can do is watch and *feel*—"
"That's the Gift."

"It's a curse!" He was so mad he almost spit. "It's something I was bred for, like—like a fat chicken, or—or a white rat! It's what my mother sold me for! Say it, Rachel—"

I think it's one of the few times I've ever seen her afraid; you could almost see the fear creeping out the corners of her eyes. "I must take care of my children—" she says, scooting back a little bit on the bench.

"*I'm* one of your—" he started. But something in that pretty face of hers made him break. With a strange kind of sound coming deep out of his throat, he leaped up off the bench and ran away.

I caught up with him at the gate. He had his face pressed up against the bars and was crying real hard. I don't think he knew I was there until the crying slowed down to hiccups.

"Sorry, kid," I said to him.

He just hiccupped and stared at me.

"Come on," I told him. "It's been a tough day. Let's go get some dinner."

While we were driving I thought awful hard about how to say it. It's not an easy thing to say, you know? It's tough on a kid. It's tough on everyone. Maybe even her.

I finally said, "You gotta understand about people."

His eyes turned to look at me, but I don't think he was behind them. He had that look of not understanding anything.

"It's just," I went on slowly, "they *have* to use you."

His eyes slid away again.

"Look, Phil," I says, "it's like a kid with a new jackknife. He can't just imagine what the thing can do. He has to try it out. Not

meaning to hurt anything, but just to see what it'll do, y'understand?"

Nothing. I kept trying.

"Now those eggheads, they stumble on somethin' special like the psi-gene, they just gotta—well, you know—they gotta try to *make* somebody like you. And when people find out they can take four or five detectives off the payroll just by breedin' one kid like you, then they gotta try it out. And when somebody like your ma knows she has the gene and can make a bundle of money just by having a kid, she's just gotta do it.

"Hell, take me, for example. A psi-mute like me's got no other way to earn this kind of money. Sure, I'm here in the first place 'cause you need somebody to take care of you who don't spit out feelings all the time. But it ain't that I don't care. Honest, it ain't that nobody cares about you, or about the detectives losing their jobs, or anything. Everybody's just *gotta* do it. Y'see?"

By the look on his face, I might as well have been talking to the steering wheel. I was starting to feel a little desperate. I stopped for a second to think about another way to tell him, giving a big cough to try to make my voice normal again. It didn't work.

"Problem is," I told him, "they hadn't oughta give you kids places like that to grow up in. It makes 'em feel better, but they don't know how it is to come out of a place like that into a hell-hole world like this. They don't see you kids come out of those gates going on about how great it's gonna be to help catch the bad guys and share your 'gift.' They don't see how you are, the first time you walk into a room where some guy's brains have been bashed out, when them traces hit you in the face. They don't know how tough it is for you to just walk around on the street, soaking up all those feelings everybody's pouring out.

"I don't know. I don't say it is or ain't right. Maybe it'll mean something better someday. After a while most guys figure out how to use a jackknife for somethin' besides sticking frogs. But I can tell you this: there sure ain't no good fighting it."

The kid said kinda low and soft, "I can leave."

Now that bad feeling of mine's getting *really* bad. They all say the same thing. Not one of 'em understands this is all they got.

It comes out harder-sounding than I want it to: "Kid, there's nowhere you could survive that don't have people, that don't have traces. Don't you see, kid? You got no choice. It's your job—make the best of it."

He sat there with a face like a stiff's. And me, I was still trying to think of what else to say. And maybe I was paying attention to my driving for a minute. Just for a minute.

The car wasn't moving that fast when he threw himself out. Just fast enough that those long legs of his disappeared like magic. Then there was just the tire-squealing and brake-screaming.

I cursed the best I could under the circumstances, and mashed the brake with both feet. The passenger door swung open so wild that it whammed back into my face just as I threw myself across the seat. I was in time to see the kid stumble to his feet, catch his balance with one hand on the pavement before lurching off into the traffic. By the time I got my own feet under me and struggled out of the car, there was more screaming, and the kid was gone.

Just like he wanted.

I stood around for a while, watching as they loaded the kid's body onto a gurney and into an ambulance. When there wasn't anything left to watch, I figured I might as well go in.

The captain's secretary ignored me, but then, she always ignores me. It was the captain himself who said it.

"Sixteen goddam months, Bartell! The one before that only lasted twenty. What the hell do you do to 'em?"

I stood there staring at him, feeling stupid, wondering what I'm supposed to say this time. The captain jerked and banged the drawers in his desk, looking for something, or maybe just working out his mad. Then he stares hard at me again.

"So now we gotta pay for another friggin' funeral, and requisition *another* psi-freak. My budget can't stand this, Bartell! What are you going to do about it?"

I started to say something—I don't know, just anything to get him off my back—but then he says, real disgusted, "Ah, get outta here." So I left.

It was past dark by the time I got home. In the doorway, in the dark, I can smell the stale smells of toast and eggs and coffee from the dishes the kid and I left this morning.

I'm tired, really tired. Thinking about how empty the place will be tonight. Thinking about going tomorrow to the pink-white house to bring another psi home—one who's all primed and righteous and happy to be an Angel of Truth.

Maybe with the next one I'll get it right.

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FICTION

A Cool, Clean Shot

by
**Thomas
Adcock**

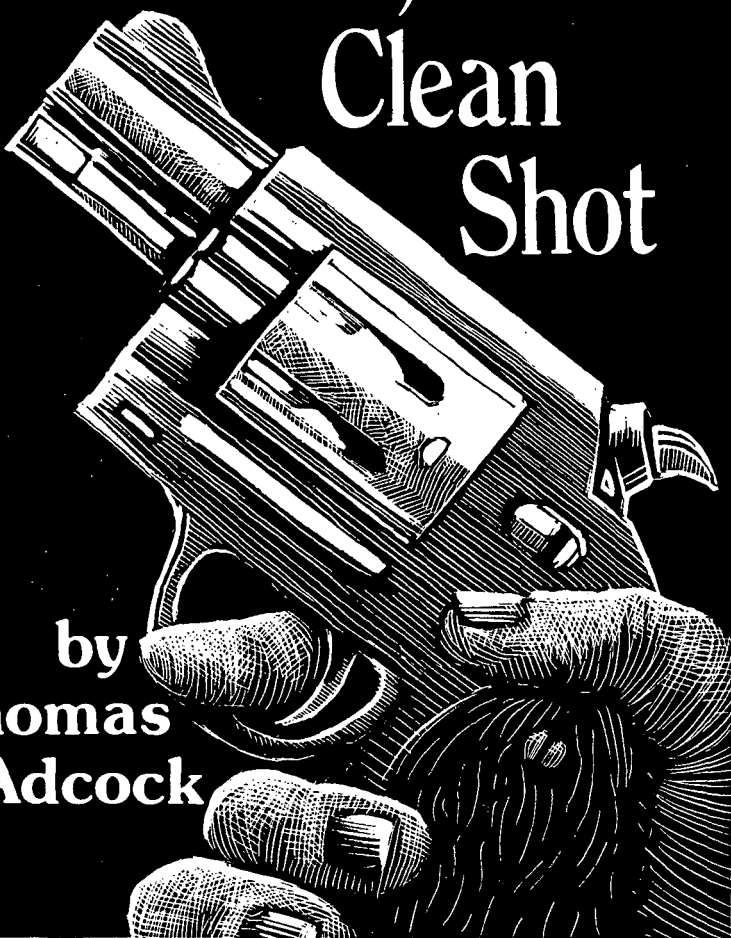


Illustration by Tim Foley

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The man who had attempted to hold up the liquor store fell forward when Detective Holland shot him, and now he was facedown and dead on the sidewalk in the sweet summer evening. The deceased wore a cream-colored linen suit, with the crease still fresh at the back of the trousers. His shoes were nicely shined. Cars were stopping along Eighth Avenue, drivers and passengers gawked.

"You did it real nice and quick, George," the other detective said to Holland. "No mistakes. A cool, clean shot."

"Thanks, Morty."

"I guess now you're two-thirds on your way to being a sergeant," Detective Morty Lerner said, not in envy but in professional appraisal. Cool and clean was how it happened, and cool and clean was generally rewarded in time. "You were damn good, George."

"I was tremendous," Holland said quietly.

He was still taking breaths, very deep breaths, and looking down at the man he had shot after jumping out of the unmarked car that Morty was driving. And Holland was thinking, he's about my age; thirty years old, maybe thirty-one or -two. He did not look like a criminal and he was certainly no punk, not the way he was

dressed. He had neatly-trimmed reddish brown hair. He looked Irish. The lights from the liquor store window kept the pavement so bright that Holland could have counted the freckles on the backs of the dead man's hands if he'd wanted to.

Detective Holland could not see the dead man's face, but neither could he forget the one brief glimpse of it that had been etched in his mind. The grin on the face of the man he shot, the grin before he crumpled to the street.

There were sirens now. Squad cars, loud and insistent, were almost to the scene.

Detective Lerner was crouched beside the body. He plucked a wallet from the dead man's back trouser pocket and opened it. "Can you believe this guy?" Lerner said. "He packs a wallet to a stickup. Stupid, really amateurish. Okay—the name's Tim McKelvey, according to a driver's license that should've been renewed two years ago. Four twenty—the other number's smudged pretty bad—Amsterdam Avenue. That'd be uptown aways. Here's some snapshots—somebody who looks like a wife and two redheaded kids." Lerner looked up at Holland. "You all right?"

"I'm okay, Morty. I never

killed a man before, that's all." Holland thought, *That's all?*

There was now a crowd of passersby closing in on the body that lay still in the vivid light. But then uniformed cops from the arriving squad cars pushed through the people and established a circle of police privacy. Detective Lerner picked up money that had recently been clutched in the late Tim McKelvey's left hand. "A lousy hundred and twenty-one bucks," he muttered. He also picked up an envelope from Con Edison that must have spilled out from the inside breast pocket of McKelvey's suitcoat, and a small automatic pistol. Lerner marked these things, as routine required. There was nothing to do now but wait for the specialists, from Central Homicide and also from Internal Affairs Division.

"Want a cigarette, George?" Detective Lerner held open his pack of Marlboros.

"No, thanks, Morty."

He was steady enough without a cigarette. In fact, he had been very cool and steady through the whole episode, which surprised him. But there was the oddest sensation that kept growing and getting bigger inside of him, which worried him because he had no idea what it was. Unless it was his

conscience. It was half-past eleven.

George Holland got home at ten minutes after one in the morning. A stiff breeze swept through the apartment when he opened the door, raising the curtains like summer skirts; he felt as if he was sailing up the Hudson River in an excursion boat. Lisa had left a light on in the living room. He walked to the larger of the two bedrooms, where his own two kids were asleep, lightly covered. One window was closed in the kids' room because the breeze from the north could get so muscular, even in July. He kissed his children and crept out toward the kitchen. He heard the refrigerator click, then hum in its easy way. He thought, *I'd love a beer . . . and I wonder what McKelvey would have had.*

"George?" Lisa called.

He walked to their bedroom, carrying his bottle of Moosehead. Lisa snapped on the lamp at her side of the bed and sat up, resting on one arm and watching him; squinting, and looking pretty. Holland sat down on the bed with his beer and nuzzled his face into the warm, soft groove of her neck and shoulder.

"Hello, Dutchman," Lisa said. "You and your beer."

"Hello yourself," Holland said, very softly, his face still

against her. He did not say "Hello, Irish" as usual. There was a difference tonight. The word projected too easily the man on the sidewalk and his reddish brown hair and his Celtic freckles. Holland passed the beer to his wife, who took a swallow. It was a kind of ritual they had. Lisa would not mind the smell of go-to-bed beer if she had a little bit herself. He sat watching her and she saw the trouble in his face.

"You very tired?" she asked.

"Not so tired."

"What then?"

"We had a little action to-night, Morty and I."

She ran a hand through her hair. Her full lips were pale, her eyes worried. "Yes, George?"

"I killed a man," he told her. "A stickup on Eighth Avenue."

"Sweet merciful Savior!" Lisa said, holding a hand over her mouth. All the color was gone from her face. She moved close to her husband. "It might have been you."

"Well, it wasn't me. It was him. And—he looked just like your brother Frank. You know how I like Frank."

She looked at him carefully now, knowing as a cop wife knows when the trouble is most real—when it's so calmly stated. Her husband had never before come home like this. She

asked, "You want to talk, George?"

"I think so."

Lisa got out of bed. She looked so good in her nightgown. Holland thought, I'll be dead when I don't notice that. She went out to the kitchen and George followed and sat down at the table while Lisa started coffee in a small percolator.

"Excuse me," Lisa said, tears welling. She went quickly to the kids' room and stood there for a minute, touched their sleeping faces, then went back to her husband. She said, "Go ahead now, tell me all about it."

"This guy was coming out of a liquor store," Holland said, "and Morty and I just happen to be driving by. The guy's running, he's got some money in one hand—a hundred and some lousy bucks, it turns out—and a pistol in the other. I jump out . . . he looks at me, he grins like your brother, and I shoot him."

Lisa got up from the table and poured coffee. "You're a cop, this guy had a gun. It's not so complicated, George."

But Holland wondered, did I give him enough of a chance? Would this nicely-dressed guy have shot me if I hadn't got him first? He said to Lisa, "I don't know. Or if I do know, I don't want to say—yet."

"Please, George."

"It's trying to remember things as they were that's got me mixed up. Something happened, in a split second, and I don't know yet in my own mind if I was right or wrong. All I know is—and this is going to sound real strange—I liked him."

Lisa stared at him blankly. "That's nuts. How can you like or dislike a man in one split second?"

"You get an impression. A guy is dead and you remember him, the look on his face—and you like what you remember. I think. See how I'm stuck? His name was McKelvey, he lived uptown on the West Side. It looks like he's probably married—and has two kids, like me."

"That's really laying it on yourself," Lisa said. "Anybody can have kids. Did he love them the way you love ours? Would he go out with a gun in his hand if he was what he should've been?"

George considered this, but it did not compute. He said, "After we got back to the station house, we found out a little. He's got no criminal record for one thing. He was a good dresser, I can tell you that; he'd make Morty and me look like bums. Besides a wallet, believe it or not, and an automatic, all

he had on him was a Con Ed bill three months overdue. And his face—there was this stupid grin on his face, like your brother Frank's face when Mary finds out he's been drinking."

"Did you see the wife and kids, George?"

"God no! Somebody else checks that out and calls it in. That's routine. So I really don't know much about the guy. Except, there's something that's got its teeth in me..." His voice faded.

"Say what you want to say, George."

"I keep thinking he wouldn't have shot me," Holland said slowly, as if he were reciting. "That he'd have dropped the gun and the lousy hundred-and-some dollars on the sidewalk if I'd just waited. I keep thinking I've murdered him—"

"Stop it!" Lisa screamed. The kids started crying in the other room.

So Holland stopped. Lisa fell against him. And they held together, swaying, slowly rocking in intimate expression of things they felt but could not speak. Her eyes were wet against his face and Holland, who had never before been weak, was grateful to have it this way.

"They gave me tomorrow off," he said. "I'll look around,

you know? Find out some things I need to know."

"You're tormenting yourself. You're imagining."

"I've got to know."

"But you couldn't have done anything wrong. Not you, George."

"I wonder."

It was almost noon and the sun had climbed like a hot balloon. There was not a breeze worth a sick man's sneeze on Amsterdam Avenue. The McKelveys lived in one of a group of flats above a Korean fruit and vegetable market, a shoe repair shop, and a corner bar. The smell of bananas was richer than perfume in the heat. Holland pressed a vestibule buzzer under a mail slot marked McKELVEY. There was no response. But the door to the lobby and stairs was open, so Holland walked up a flight and knocked at Apartment C. He waited. He tried the next apartment—B. No answer. Only A responded.

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you know the McKelveys?"

"I know them." She was thin and old and wearing a blue housedress and white socks. There was sweat in the lines of her neck. She pushed her hair back and said, "Well?"

"I'm a policeman." Holland

flashed his detective's gold shield.

"What's their business ain't mine."

She closed the door. Holland thought of sticking his foot in before she could close it but decided against it. The time he was spending on his day off was his own, and he did not want a lot of shouting in the hallway and that sort of thing. Anyway, that's what he promised when he telephoned the station house to see if any more information had turned up on the McKelveys. It had. The widow was notified at the Amsterdam Avenue address, all right; the McKelveys had two children, all right; Marjorie McKelvey was employed in some capacity at a place up on 99th Street called Harry's Hideaway.

Holland walked downstairs to the street and the griddle heat of the day. He looked back up at the flats. The woman in Apartment A was looking down at him, not kindly. He thought, already I'm an enemy. The owner of the fruit and vegetable market sat half asleep under a patched green awning. Holland walked past him, and the strong smell of his bananas, and decided to try the bar at the corner. It said BRADY'S on the window.

"A draft, please," Holland said, taking a stool.

"It's the right weather for it." The bartender filled a pilsner glass. "There you go."

It was a nice draft in nice surroundings, Holland thought. Brady's, like a thousand other bars in modest neighborhoods, had the restful substantiality not otherwise available to most of its clientele. It was not air-conditioned, but the fans turned effectively, almost silently under the old pressed tin ceiling. There were a half dozen men at the bar, two of them reading the tabloids. They looked at Holland with no special interest, yet Holland sensed that their talk had been suspended: The bartender had walked away, and now he came back by Holland, carrying some empty glasses.

"Fill it again, sir?"

"I don't mind," said Holland, watching him. "You know a family next door, name of McKelvey?"

"Tim?"

There was intimacy and feeling in the way that one word had been spoken. And it controlled the moment. The total attention of each man present in the bar was now involved. They all looked at Holland. The bartender stared at his own hands, flat on the bar—studiously, as though he had never seen them before.

"You a cop?"

"That's right," Holland said. He showed his shield. "It's why I asked the question. I figure you might have known him."

"Know Tim?" The bartender's smile was wistful. He turned to the others. "Did we know the sweetest guy in the world or what?"

"You can lay off the bull," Holland said. But the weight of despair now hit him; he had gambled and lost, and he began to fear what he might find out about a sweet guy.

"Look—you asked about a friend of mine," the bartender said, "who was shot last night by a cop." He took the ten dollar bill that Holland had set out in front of him, rang up two drafts on the register, and returned four dollars and change. "I don't know why I don't throw you out of here, pal. You want I should be happy because one of you cops shot Tim dead?"

"No, I don't want that." Holland warned himself, *Easy does it now*. "How long did you know Tim McKelvey?"

"Six, seven months. He come down from New England someplace looking for a break. One helluva break he got, hey—him with his talent?"

"What talent?"

"He was a comic," the bartender said. "Ask anybody here that knew the guy. Laughs? Hey, Bill—how about that Tim

McKelvey for laughs?"

The man named Bill was large and lumpy. He swamped the bar stool that supported him. Sweat worked through the weave of his T-shirt. Bill looked Holland up and down and snorted at him. Then he said, "You play the piano, officer?"

"No," Holland said.

"Or sing?"

"I'm not the one being questioned here."

"You ast if Tim had talent—didn't you?"

Holland's silence conceded that. He took another swallow of beer. It tasted less good than it had before. The heat was rising. His head was aching.

"Tim'd sit there at the piano—any night," Bill said, pointing to an upright model toward the back of the place. "Hell, you'd think his fingers was part of the keyboard. Name it, he'd play it. Sweet, hot, boogie, Eye-talian ballads. Sing like anybody you'd see on TV—he was that good. And tell stories? Even a cop'd bust a gut when McKelvey cut loose."

Another man at the bar said, "It's just that poor Tim never got his break, see. But good times or bad, he'd smile like happy was wrote on his face. Good times or—"

"All right, all right," Holland interrupted.

Bill belched and said, "You

don't like the way we're telling it?"

"I get the idea," Holland said. "He was the sweetest guy since Little Boy Blue. But last night Little Boy Blue carried a gun. Did you all know that? What I want to know is, how come?"

Nobody said anything. Holland asked Bill, "Did he work?"

"Worked in show business, that's what he'd tell you," Bill said. "That a crime?"

"Who supported his kids?"

"Ask his ghost," said Bill, with a great sense of theater. Holland suddenly hated him, almost as much as he was starting to hate himself. "Ask the cop that shot him down!"

That line hurt and Holland thought, they're ahead of me. He turned to the bartender then, hoping to change the trend of evidence. "Did you know McKelvey's wife?"

"I'd see her around," the bartender said. "But she never come in here. A big brunette she is, she could knock down a wall. Tim never talked about her. He was not one for laying his troubles down on the bar."

Bill spat something on the floor and said, "She was never no help to his career."

Holland did not want to talk to Bill. He said to the bartender, "There's nobody up at the apartment. Where would I find her? Where are the kids?"

"Try the old lady," he advised.

"Whose old lady?"

"Tim's mother-in-law. Her name's Delaney. Around the corner. The first house, with the tailor in the basement."

Holland walked out into the glare. The sun was high and shrinking most of the shade. A truck, half stacked with kegs of beer, had parked outside Brady's at a bus stop. The driver went around to the side of the truck. Holland recognized him from other neighborhoods, from back when he was a uniformed cop.

"I'll be only a few minutes, George—okay?"

"It's all right," Holland said.

He pushed the downstairs button where it said DELANEY. The stairs were steep in the converted brownstone house. It was cool and dark and damp in the narrow stairwell.

"Mrs. Delaney?" Holland called to the woman who appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Who is it?"

"Police, Mrs. Delaney."

She was not fat, but she was round and small boned. Her eyes were dark blue and quite beautiful. She said, "Can I help you?"

"I need to talk to you."

Mrs. Delaney rubbed her hands together before saying, "Oh, all right—come on up."

Holland climbed one flight and stepped inside a tiny, neat apartment. The inevitable summer dust danced in slanted sunlight that the shades could not exclude. There were two kids standing near the window—a pair of redheaded boys, maybe four and six. They wore nothing but shorts and sneakers in the heat and looked healthy, like boys at summer camp. They watched him with such alert and friendly interest that Holland was obliged to look away.

There was a small oak table in the center of the room, polished and clean. There was a worn rug on the floor under it. The place was old fashioned, like his grandmother's place up in the Bronx. On the walls Holland could see the treasures of the respectable Irish working class: a "God Bless Our Home" in lacy lettering, a picture of the Sacred Heart, a photograph of John Fitzgerald Kennedy cut out of *Life* magazine.

"Won't you sit down, officer?"

Holland took a seat at the oak table, and so did she. "Sixth Precinct, West 10th Street," he said, avoiding his name. "About last night—"

Mrs. Delaney interrupted him. "Let's remember the children and not say what it wouldn't be right to say."

"Yes, ma'am. The fact is, I'd

like to talk with the boys' mother, if that's possible."

Mrs. Delaney said, "My daughter isn't here." She looked cautiously at the boys, then leaned forward. "A stranger might think . . . well, he might imagine that Margie don't much care, not to be here at a time like this."

"He might," Holland said. He took out a large, sodden handkerchief and wiped his face. "Would you mind if the children went to another room, Mrs. Delaney?"

"There's only this room here, and the kitchen."

"Well—could they go outside then?"

She looked at him, appalled. "Into the street? With all the talk that's going on about what happened last night? And the boys unprepared for the things they'd hear?"

"I see what you mean. Where is your daughter, Mrs. Delaney?"

"She went to her place of business." Mrs. Delaney, sitting amidst her variety of pious pictures, did not seem comfortable with the subject of Marjorie McKelvey's employment. "She has a temporary position, sort of."

"You mean up at Harry's Hideaway?"

"I believe that's the name of it."

"It's what—a bar?"

"Well, I've never been there," Mrs. Delaney said, rolling her eyes. "Only, please don't get the wrong impression—about Margie, I mean."

The older of the boys approached the table carefully and stood next to his grandmother, his arm on her round shoulder. Holland stared at him, even though he did not want to; he looked like he could be Lisa's little boy, or Lisa's brother Frank's boy. The boy said to Holland, "My father got hurt. My father can sing, and he can fight."

Holland had to wonder, fight?

"Please, Jerry!" Mrs. Delaney said to the boy.

Holland kept staring at him. Then he got up and walked to the door. Mrs. Delaney followed him, making no comment. Holland felt as if he might faint with grief. He turned to Mrs. Delaney and asked, "What kind of a person was your son-in-law?"

Her face told him nothing. But her lips trembled. She said, "Must you do this? Must you do it now?"

Holland walked silently down the stairs to the street. The same big truck, with a diminished load of beer kegs, was leaving the bus stop. The significance of this would soon

register with him. He went back into Brady's, to use the telephone to call up Harry's Hideaway and get the exact address. Everybody looked at him with hostility in their eyes. He glanced from face to accusing face, then understood: they had learned his identity from the beer truck driver. The big one named Bill, with his affinity for the role, was impatiently ready to be the group's spokesman.

"Say there, you never told us you come by here to take a bow," Bill said to Holland. He raised the *New York Post* in his hand. "You're the cop with his name in the paper here."

"What about it?" Holland said.

"The man o' the week," Bill said with scorn. "The big man who shot the bad guy."

"Knock it off," Holland warned him.

Bill started walking toward him, with the rolled-up newspaper held like a club and the angry rumble of his mates to encourage his advance. "We're all Tim's friends is who we are, Detective Holland—and there ain't one of us likes what went down last night. We seen you trigger-happy cops before."

Holland hit him then. He did it automatically, just like he had shot Tim McKelvey automatically. Only this time, he hit Bill with a reckless rage, in

response to the self-loathing building and building in him. He hit him hard, so hard that big fat Bill staggered backward and fell down before picking himself up and roaring back at Holland, shouting obscenities, his heavy arms raised and waving. And then Holland decked him cool and clean, and Bill fell for good. No one challenged him now. They were all motionless at the bar. Bill looked up at Holland from where he was sprawled, with the stamp of defeat on him.

Holland prayed silently, God help me now if ever You're going to help me.

He did not go directly to Harry's Hideaway. He loitered at the counter of an open frankfurter stand at the corner of Broadway and 99th, nursing a Styrofoam cup of watery orangeade. He reflected on how, as a first-grade detective, he had displayed, in slugging fat Bill, the smooth, imperturbable intelligence of a graduate maniac. But this problem receded from his thoughts, yielding as always to the greater one: What kind of man did I kill last night? Would McKelvey have fired at me?

From where Holland the maniac stood, he was able to watch the luncheon guests depart from Harry's Hideaway. Each

time the door opened, tired bump-and-grind music poured out into the humid street. It was half-past two. Holland finished his orangeade and walked over to Harry's and stepped inside. It was air-conditioned, and Holland was grateful.

"May I check your hat, sir?" Her breath was candied and she wore fishnet hose, a bikini bottom but no top, and a blonde wig the color and consistency of straw around a bottle of Spanish wine.

"I'm not wearing a hat, and I'm not exactly a customer," Holland said.

She jiggled herself. "Well—you know what I mean."

Holland took out his NYPD shield and displayed it. Blondie shrank away from him, as if she'd been a vampire and Holland had just flashed a crucifix. Now he waited for his eyes to adjust completely from the piercing sunlight outdoors to the darkness of the place, and for his pores to adjust to the chill. Gradually, he could see there was a small stage in back with a stripper lazing through her act, a few dozen guys in polyester suits and sunglasses sitting around at little tables, and a big pit bar along the side wall.

He saw the big brunette, too. She stood at a table occupied by two guys who looked as if they

were in a hurry. She was totaling a check. She went to the bar and then returned to the table with change. Her customers got up to leave. Holland walked over to her.

"Mrs. McKelvey?"

She had noticed him. Her gaze was level, unsurprised. Her hands rested only tentatively on the glasses she had gathered to one side. The words of Brady's bartender—"she could knock down a wall"—were sustained by her size, but not by the tiredness Holland saw in her face. Out of respect for her widowhood, Holland looked nowhere else but at her face.

"You're the law, huh?" She began to pick up the things she had set aside. "Well, it's not your fault." She cleared the table and picked up the glasses and ashtrays and said, "I'll be back."

Mrs. McKelvey walked well—her high hips rhythmic, but by no means on deliberate display. To her, the hose and the bikini bottom and the air-conditioned chest was just a uniform. She returned in a minute, her hands behind her back, tying up an apron she must have borrowed from somebody in the kitchen. Holland was grateful for this small favor. He did not want his eyes wandering while he was interrogating the widow

of the sweetest guy in the whole world, whom he had shot dead. He shook from the cold.

"Might as well sit here," Mrs. McKelvey said. They sat at the table she had just cleared. The stripper onstage finished her act and there was an intermission, for which Holland was further grateful. "Cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks," Holland said. Then he was sorry. It was cold and his mouth was dry and he wanted to say he would have the coffee after all. But he said instead, "About your husband, I'm sorry . . ."

"That's official, huh? From the department?"

"I said I was sorry, that's all. There's nothing wrong with somebody saying he's sorry."

"Let's get you some coffee anyhow," she said. "You look like you could use it. You new on the job or something?"

Mrs. McKelvey raised her arm and another waitress in fishnet hose came over and she told her they would both take coffee. Holland said, "No, I'm not new . . ." Then he decided he would just come out with it. He said, "Look, Mrs. McKelvey—I was on Eighth Avenue last night, outside the liquor store . . ."

It was as much as he could say. The other waitress came with the coffee and poured it

into cups and left cream and sugar. Mrs. McKelvey took hers black, Holland light with one lump.

"You were the one, huh?" she asked him. "That's what you're trying to say?"

Slowly, miserably, Holland nodded.

"You poor, poor slob." She spoke almost tenderly.

"You don't hate me?"

"Hate? What's the percentage in that? Is that why you come here—just to tell me you were the one?"

"That, and other things," Holland said.

But he really had no idea what he would say next.

"I keep remembering how your husband looked. It's like I tried to tell my wife last night. She thought I was crazy, but I told her I liked his face."

"Yeah, he was goodlooking," Mrs. McKelvey said. She drained the last of her coffee from the cup and put it down. "He had a nice smile. Everybody said so."

Holland stared at the tabletop, remembering something said at Brady's. Which he then said himself, more or less, "He'd smile like happy was written on his face."

"Yeah, I guess."

"I was in Brady's today, next door to you," Holland said.

"They told me what they thought of him. They told me about his smile."

"He had a smile like a light switch, Tim had," Mrs. McKelvey said quietly. "Turn it off and turn it on, whenever it was handy—specially when he was scared. He made friends like a dog, wherever he went, and the only hand he bit was mine . . ."

Holland waited, hoping to hear maybe one bad word about the man he had killed. It was very still now during the intermission. He could only hear glasses clinking at the bar. But Marjorie McKelvey was not saying anything. She had faded off, and Holland would have to revive her somehow. He sensed she was willing to speak ill of the dead, and maybe this was what he needed to hear, to make his questions go away. So he prodded her with, "They told me also he was talented."

"Talented, yeah. He could play piano, he could sing a song, he told jokes. He must of been a regular sensation at that dump, Brady's. Listen—you want a real drink?"

"I wouldn't mind a Moosehead, if you've got it."

Mrs. McKelvey got up and went to the bar. She was taller than some of the men in the polyester suits there, and with broader shoulders, too. She returned with the requested beer

and, for herself, a double scotch. She sat down and said, "So where were we?"

"I was telling you how I asked around today about your husband. Besides Brady's, I also went over to your mother's place around the corner and spoke to her some. Oh, and one of your boys talked to me, too. The older one."

"Yeah? What'd Jerry tell you?"

"He said his daddy was a fighter."

Marjorie McKelvey drank down half her scotch, and Holland saw how this fueled a transformation in her face. She did not look tired any more; she looked hard and unforgiving now. "Yeah, he used to tell them boys this fairy tale of how he was a prizefighter up in Boston once upon a time. That's a load! Later, when the boys were asleep, he'd try making the story come true by banging on me, big as I am. The little creep, he didn't usually get the better of me, though."

Holland's mind filled with fugitive thoughts. Did I put poor Tim out of his misery? . . . Was that why he grinned when he went down? . . . How in the world did I luck out and marry a girl like Lisa? Then, without thinking, he said, "So the two of you, you didn't get along?"

"You're one real sharp detec-

tive, huh?" She eyed him.

Holland's face reddened. He stammered, "I don't get one thing . . . I mean, if he was talented like everybody says, how come he couldn't—"

"Tim had a talent for everything but finding a job, 'specially work that'd muss up his beautiful clothes, which he was always saying he had to have for show business." She put back the rest of the scotch, and her voice grew as rough as plowed cement. "Show business! I suppose them birds down at Brady's told you Tim never got his break?"

"That's right."

"Well, there's another load. I have noticed in life that everybody gets a break, no matter what they say otherwise. Tim, he got a gig at one of those comedy clubs, you know? When we first come down here to New York. Ten minutes into his act and Tim's stunned because the crowd ain't lapping it up like they do at Brady's when he's working for free—so he just froze right up, scared out of his mind so bad he just stood there grinning like a goon."

"I see."

"That wasn't even his first break," she added. "He had others where he flopped even bigger. I told him to forget show biz and get real. By which I meant get a job—even a

crummy job like I got to work. But, oh no—not the talented Tim McKelvey with his pretty clothes and his pearly smile."

Holland asked, "Any idea why he decided to pull a robbery?"

"What Tim needed, he got off me—until I cut off the little creep about two weeks back. So where else'd he get any money? One of them birds at his bar prob'ly was bragging about how easy it is to stick up a liquor store, and Tim, he gets it into his head how he can do it." She flagged a passing waitress and asked for another double scotch; Holland declined another Moosehead. "This cop who came by to tell me how Tim got it told me Tim was carrying his damn wallet with him right while he's trying to pull off a crime. A lot of these talented types, they ain't particularly bright. See what I mean?"

"I see." Holland wanted to leave Harry's Hideaway in a big hurry, as Mrs. McKelvey's customers had left her a little earlier. But he remained still. He turned, though, when the waitress came along with the second scotch, and over at the bar he saw Morty Lerner, thank God, watching him. Holland tipped a hand at his partner, Lerner caught the signal. A clock over the bar said it was ten minutes after three.

"You think I'm an awful bitch, don't you?" Mrs. McKelvey said. She took a big swallow of her scotch. "A nice guy like you hearing me say what I'm saying about my husband. Which is, I'm almost glad he's dead and gone." She wiped her plump lips. "D'you think I *like* saying that?"

"No, ma'am," Holland said.

"Then wish a widow-lady some luck."

He wished her luck and stood up, and there seemed nothing more to say. He reached into his pocket and found three twenties and gave them to the big brunette widow drinking scotch, whose eyes looked tired again, and a little wet. He said, "You'll do all right. Your boys will do all right." Then he hurried out.

He walked with Lerner in the heat, along the thinly shaded side of Broadway. They were silent for a while, but then Holland asked, "How did you know I'd be at Harry's Hideaway?"

"Well, frankly, George, that was about as easy as finding City Hall. I went to that address on Amsterdam after Lisa called me up and said she was worried about you. I soon found out you decked a barfly at a joint called Brady's, where they also told me you'd gone to see

a Mrs. Delaney. See? You can't beat modern police science, eh, George?"

They walked along for another minute or two without saying anything. Then Lerner asked Holland, "So what did you learn about our Tim McKelvey?"

"He was a bum—I think."

"Feel better?"

Holland stopped. He was slightly irritated. "Morty, look—it doesn't matter if the guy was a bum or a saint. It's not the point. I thought maybe it was, but it's not. The point is what I didn't mention to you last night: did I fire too soon? Could I have given McKelvey more time?"

A smile spread across Morty Lerner's face; a strange smile, Holland thought. Lerner said, "Yeah, I suppose so. You could have given McKelvey time to take apart his automatic and reload it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, while you were up-town here tormenting yourself and everybody else, I was talking to the specialists."

"What?"

"The specialists, George. You know—the ballistics and forensics boys from Central Homicide, the I.A.D. types?"

Holland did not say anything. He just wobbled a little on his feet.

Lerner said, "Here's the way it plays, George. McKelvey pulled the trigger on you. Only his pistol jammed up. Only you don't know it, not in the split second the whole thing happened."

"So, I didn't—?"

"No, George. You didn't fire too soon, that's for damn well sure. Hell, man—you're lucky to be alive."

They walked along slowly and Holland thought, *McKelvey*

fired at me! Only he flopped ... so was scared and he grinned. A little breeze came up from the river. It was a miserable breeze that hardly stirred the lazy dust of the day. But to Holland it was gorgeous, like a wind raising Lisa's summer skirts.

"I feel like I'm sailing up the Hudson," he said expansively. "Come on over to my place, Morty, and let's drink some beer."



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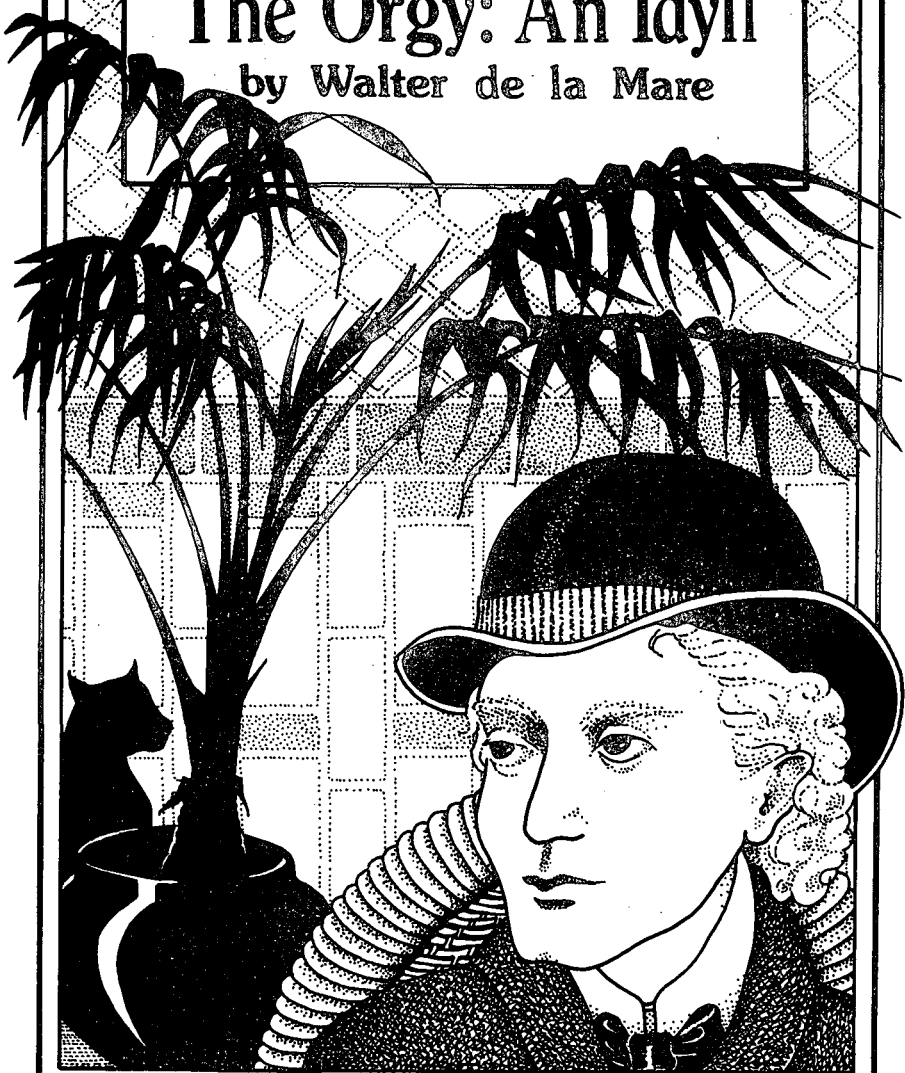
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MCGH-6

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Orgy: An Idyll

by Walter de la Mare



It was a Wednesday morning, and Mayday, and London, its West End too, crisp, brisk, scintillating. Even the horses had come out in their Sunday best. With their nosegays and ribbons and rosettes they might have been on their way to a wedding—the nuptials of Labor and Capital, perhaps. As for people, the wide pavements of the great street were packed with them. Not so many busy idlers of the one sex as of the other, of course, at this early hour—a top hat here, a pearl gray Homburg there; but of the feminine a host as eager and variegated as the butterflies in an Alpine valley in midsummer; some stepping daintily down from their landaulets like Painted Ladies out of the chrysalis, and thousands of others, blues and browns and speckleds and sables and tawnies and high-fliers and maiden's blushes, from all parts of the world and from most of the suburbs, edging and eddying along, this way, that way, their eyes goggling, their tongues clacking, but most of them, their backs to the highway, gazing, as though mesmerized, in and in through the beautiful plate glass windows at the motley merchandise on the other side. And much of that on the limbs and trunks of beatific images almost as lifelike but a good deal less active than themselves.

The very heavens, so far as they could manage to peep under the blinds, seemed to be smiling at this plenty. Nor had they any need for care concerning the future, for nursemaids pushing their baby carriages before them also paraded the pavements, their infant charges laid in dimpled sleep beneath silken awning and coverlet, while here and there a tiny tot chattered up into the air like a starling.

A clock, probably a church clock, and only just audible, struck ten. The sun from its heights far up above the rooftops blazed down upon the polished asphalt and walls with such an explosion of splendor that it looked as if everything had been repainted overnight with a thin coat of crystalline varnish and then sprinkled with frozen seawater. And every human creature within sight seemed to be as heart-free and gay as this beautiful weather promised to be brief. With one exception only—poor Philip Pim.

And why not? He was young—so young in looks, indeed, that if Adonis had been stepping along at his side they might have been taken for cousins. He was charmingly attired, too, from his little, round, hard felt hat—not unlike Mercury's usual wear, but without the wings—to his neat brogue shoes; and he was so blond, with his pink cheeks and flaxen hair, that at first you could scarcely

distinguish his silken eyebrows and eyelashes, though they made up for it on a second glance. Care seemed to never have sat on those young temples. Philip looked as harmless as he was unharmed.

Alas! this without of his had no resemblance whatever to his within. He eyed vacantly a buzzing hive-like abandonment he could not share; first, because though he had the whole long day to himself he had no notion of what to do with it; and next, because only the previous afternoon the manager of the bank in which until then he had had a stool specially reserved for him every morning, had shaken him by the hand and had wished him well—forever. He had said how deeply he regretted Philip's services would not be indulged in by the bank any longer. He would miss him. Oh yes, very much indeed—but missed Philip must be.

The fact was that Philip had never been able to add up pounds, shillings, and pence so that he could be certain the total was correct. His nines, too, often looked like sevens, his fives like threes. And as "simple addition" was all but his sole duty in the bank, he would not have adorned its premises for a week if his uncle, Colonel Crompton Pim, had not been acquainted with one of its most stylish directors, and was not in the habit of keeping a large part of his ample fortune in its charge. He had asked Mr. Bumbleton to give Philip a chance. But chances—some as rapidly as Manx cats—come to an end. And Philip's had.

Now, if Colonel Pim had sent his nephew when he was a small boy to a nice public school, he might have been able by this time to do simple sums very well indeed. Philip might have become an accurate adder-up. It is well to look on the bright side of things. Unfortunately, when Philip was an infant, his health had not been very satisfactory—at least to his widowed mother—and he had been sent instead to a private academy. There a Mr. Browne was the mathematical master—a Mr. Browne so much attached to algebra and to reading the *Times* in school hours that he hadn't much patience with the rudiments of arithmetic. "Just add it up," he would say, "and look up the answer. And if that isn't right, do it again."

It was prudent of him, but in these early years poor Philip had never so much as dreamed that someday he was going to be a clerk on a stool. If he had, he might not perhaps have been so eager to look up the answers. But then, his uncle was fabulously rich and yet apparently unmarriageable, and Philip was his only nephew. Why, then, should he ever have paid any attention to banks, apart

from the variety on which the wild thyme grows?

Term succeeded term, and still, though "a promising boy," he remained backward—particularly in the last of the three R's. And his holidays, so called, would be peppered with such problems as (a) If a herring and a half cost three halfpence, how many would you get for a shilling? (b) If a brick weighs a pound and a half a brick, how much does it weigh? (c) If Moses was the son of Pharaoh's daughter, etc.; and (d) Uncles and brothers have I none, and so on. And since, after successive mornings with a sheet of foolscap and a stub of pencil, Philip's answers would almost invariably reappear as (a) 18; (b) $1\frac{1}{2}$ lb.; (c) his sister, and (d) himself, Colonel Pim grew more and more impatient, and Nature had long ago given him a good start.

He had a way, too, when carpeting poor Philip, of flicking his shepherd plaid trouser leg with his handkerchief, which seemed useless to everyone concerned. And at least, instead of transferring his nephew from Mr. Browne to Christ Church, Oxford, or to Trinity College, Cambridge, or to some less delectable resort at an outlying university, he first (before setting out in pursuit of big game all around the world) consigned him to a tutor, who thanked his lucky stars the expedition would take the colonel a long time; and, on his return, gave them both a prolonged vacation.

And *then* had fallen the bolt from the blue. On the morning of his twenty-first birthday, which had promised to be so cool, so calm, so bright, Philip received a letter from his uncle. He opened it with joy; he read it with consternation. It was in terms as curt as they looked illegible, and it was merely to tell him that what the colonel called a post (but which was, in fact, a high stool) had been secured for his nephew, and that unless Philip managed to keep his seat on it for twelve consecutive months he would be cut off with a shilling.

Of these drear months about two and a half had somehow managed to melt away, and now not only was the stool rapidly following them into the limbo of the past, but at this very moment the colonel was doubtless engaged, and with his usual zest, in keeping his promise. What wonder, then, Philip was not exactly a happy young man as he wandered this sunny populous May morning aimlessly on his way. There was nothing—apart from Everything around him—to make him so, except only one minute stroke of luck that had befallen him before breakfast.

When he had risen from his tumbled bed in his London lodgings,

the sight of his striped bank trousers and his black bank coat and waistcoat had filled him with disgust. Opening the grained cupboard which did duty for a wardrobe—and in the indulgence of his tailor it was pretty full—he took down from a peg the festive suit he was now wearing, but which otherwise he had left unheeded since Easter. He found himself faintly whistling as he buttoned it on; but his delight can be imagined when, putting his finger and thumb into an upper waistcoat pocket, he discovered—a sovereign. And an excellent specimen of one, with St. George in his mantle and the dragon on the one side of it, and King Edward VII's head—cut off at the neck as if he had sat to its designer in his bath—on the other. This, with four others very much like it, had been bestowed on Philip many months ago by his Uncle Charles—a maternal uncle, who had since perished in Paris. As the rest of Philip's pockets contained only seven and a half pence in all, this coin—how forgotten, he simply could not conjecture—was treasure trove indeed.

Now, poor Philip had never cared for money. Perhaps he had always associated it with herrings and half-bricks. Perhaps he had never needed it quite enough. Since, moreover, immediately opposite his perch at the bank there hung a framed antique picture of this commodity in process of being shoveled out of receptacles closely resembling coal scuttles into great vulgar heaps upon a polished counter, and there weighed in brass scales like so much lard or glucose, he had come to like it less and less. On the other hand, he dearly enjoyed spending it. As with Adam and the happy birds in the Garden of Eden—linnet and kestrel and wren—he enjoyed seeing it fly. In this he was a precise antithesis of his uncle.

Colonel Crompton Pim loved money. He exulted in it (not vocally, of course) en masse, as the pharaohs exulted in pyramids. And he abhorred spending it. For this (and for many another) reason he had little affection for mere objects—apart, that is, from *such* objects as golf clubs, shooting boots, or hippopotamus-hoof inkstands—and he had not the smallest pleasure in buying anything for mere buying's sake.

His immense dormitory near Cheltenham, it is true, was full of furniture, but it was furniture, acquired in the sixties or thereabouts, for use and not for joy. Prodigious chairs with pigskin seats; tables of a solidity that defied time and of a wood that laughed at the worm; bedsteads of the Gog order; wardrobes resembling Assyrian sarcophagi; and ottomans which would seat with comfort

and dignity a complete royal family. As for its "ornaments," they came chiefly from Benares.

And simply because poor Philip delighted in spending money and hated impedimenta such as these with the contempt a hummingbird feels for the corpse of a rhinoceros, he had never been able to take to his uncle—not even for the sake of what he owned. And it was impossible—as he fondly supposed—for any human being to take to him for any other reason. No, there was nothing in common between them, except a few branches of the family tree. And these the colonel might already have converted into firewood.

Now, as poor Philip meandered listlessly along the street, fingering his Uncle Charles's golden sovereign in his pocket, he came on one of those gigantic edifices wherein you can purchase anything in the world—from a white elephant to a performing flea, from a cargo of coconuts to a tin-tack. This was the "store" at which his uncle "dealt." And by sheer force of habit, Philip mounted the welcoming flight of steps, crossed a large flat rubber mat, and went inside.

Having thus got safely in, he at once began to ponder how he was to get safely out—with any fraction, that is, of his golden sovereign still in his pocket. And he had realized in the recent small hours that with so little on earth now left to spend, except an indefinite amount of leisure, he must strive to spend that little with extreme deliberation.

So first, having breakfasted on a mere glance at the charred remnant of a kipper which his landlady had served up with his chicory, he entered a large gilded lift, or elevator, as the directors preferred to call it, en route to the restaurant. There he seated himself at a vacant table and asked the waitress to be so kind as to bring him a glass of milk and a bun. He nibbled, he sipped, and he watched the people—if people they really were, and not, as seemed more probable, automata intended to advertise the Ecclesiastical, the Sports, the Provincial, the Curio, the Export, and the Cast Iron Departments.

With his first sip of milk he all but made up his mind to buy a little parting present for his uncle. It would be at least a gentle gesture. With his second he decided that the colonel would be even less pleased to receive a letter, *and*, say, a velvet smoking cap, or a pair of mother of pearl cufflinks, than just a letter. By the time he had finished his bun he had decided to buy a little something for himself. But try as he might he could think of nothing (for less

than a guinea) that would be worthy of the shade of his beloved Uncle Charles. So having pushed seven fifteenths of all he else possessed under his plate for his freckled waitress, with the remaining fourpence he settled his bill and went steadily downstairs. Nineteen minutes past ten—he would have a good look about him before he came to a decision.

Hunger, it has been said, sharpens the senses, but it is apt also to have an edgy effect upon the nerves. If then, Philip's breakfast had been less exacting, or his lunch had made up for it, he might have spent the next few hours of this pleasant May morning as a young man should—in the open air. Or he might have visited the British Museum, the National Gallery, and Westminster Abbey. He might never, at any rate, in one brief morning of his mortal existence have all but died again and again of terror, abandon, shame, rapture, and incredulity. He might never—but all in good time.

He was at a loose end, and it is then that habits are apt to prevail. And of all his habits, Philip's favorite was that of ordering "goods" on behalf of his uncle. The colonel in his fantastic handwriting would post him two weekly lists—one consisting of the "wanted," the other of complaints about the previous week's "supplied." Armed with these, Philip would set out for the building he was now actually in. The first list, though not a thing of beauty, was a joy as long as it lasted. The second, for he had always flatly refused to repeat his uncle's sulphurous comments to any underling, he reserved for his old enemy, the secretary of the establishment, Sir Leopold Bull. And though in these weekly interviews Sir Leopold might boil with rage and chagrin, he never boiled over. For the name of Pim was a name of power in the secretary's office. The name of Pim was that of a heavy shareholder; and what the colonel wanted he invariably in the long run got. A chest, say, of Ceylon tea, "rich, fruity, bright infusion"; a shooting stick (extra heavy, Brugglesdon tube pattern); a quart size tantalus, for a wedding present, with a double-spring sterling silver Brahmin lock; a hundredweight of sago; a stymie, perhaps, or a click—something of that sort.

These "order days" had been the balm of Philip's late existence. His eyes fixed on his ledger and his fancy on, say saddlery, or sports, he looked forward to his Wednesdays—thirsted for them. Indeed, his chief regret at the bank, apart from little difficulties with his nines and threes, had been that his uncle's stores were

closed on Saturday afternoons. And on Sundays. His hobby had, therefore, frequently given him indigestion, since he could indulge it only between one and two P.M. It was a pity, of course, that Colonel Pim was a man of wants so few, and those of so narrow a range. Possibly the suns of India had burned the rest out of him. But for Philip, any kind of vicarious purchase had been better than none. And now these delights, too, were forever over. His fountain had run dry. Sir Leopold had triumphed.

At this moment he found himself straying into the Portmanteau and Bag Department. There is nothing like leather, and here there was nothing *but* leather, and all of it made up into articles ranging in size from trunks that would hold the remains of a Daniel Lambert to cardcases that would hold practically nothing at all. And all of a sudden Philip fancied he would like to buy a cigarette case. He would have preferred one of enamel or gold or morocco or tortoiseshell or lizard or shagreen; or even of silver or suede. But preferences are expensive. And as he sauntered on, his dreamy eye ranging the counters in search merely of a cigarette case he could *buy*, his glance alighted on a "gent's dressing case."

It was of pigskin, and it lay, unlike the central figure in Rembrandt's *Lesson in Anatomy*, so that the whole of its interior was in full view, thus revealing a modest row of silver-topped bottles, similar receptacles for soap, toothbrushes, hair oil, and eau de cologne; a shoehorn, a boothook, an ivory paper knife, and hairbrushes, "all complete." Philip mused on it for a moment or two, perplexed by a peculiar effervescence that was going on in his vitals. He then approached the counter and asked its price.

"The price, sir?" echoed the assistant, squinnying at the tiny oblong of pasteboard attached by a thread to the ring of the handle; "the price of that article is seventeen, seventeen, six."

He was a tubby little man with boot-button eyes, and his snort, Philip thought, was a trifle unctuous.

"Ah," he said, putting a bold face on the matter, "it looks a sound workaday bag. A little mediocre perhaps. Have you anything—less ordinary?"

"Something more expensive, sir? Why, yes, indeed. This is only a stock line—the 'Archdeacon' or 'Country Solicitor' model. We have prices to suit all purposes. Now if you were thinking of something which you might call resshersy, sir"—and Philip now was—"there's a dressing case under the window over there was specially made to the order of Haitch Haitch the Maharaja of Jolho-

polloluli. Unfortunately, sir, the gentleman deceased suddenly a week or two ago; climate, I understand. His funeral obloquies were in the newspaper, you may remember. The consequence being, his ladies not, as you might say, concurring, the dressing case in a manner of speaking is on our hands—and at a considerable reduction. Only six hundred and seventy-five guineas, sir; or rupees to match.”

“May I look at it?” said Philip. “Colonel Crompton Pim.”

“By all means, sir,” cried the little man as if until that moment he had failed to notice that Philip was a long-lost son; “Colonel Crompton Pim; of course. Here is the article, sir, a very handsome case, and quite unique, one of the finest, in fact, I have ever had the privilege of handling since I was transferred to this department—from the Sports, sir.”

He pressed a tiny knob, the hinges yawned, and Philip’s mouth began to water. It was in sober sooth a handsome dressing case, and the shaft that slanted in on it from the dusky window seemed pleased to be exploring it. It was a dressing case of tooled red Levant morocco, with gold locks and clasps and a lining of vermilion watered silk, gilded with a chaste design of lotus flowers, peacocks, and houris, the “fittings” being of tortoiseshell, and studded with so many minute brilliants and seed pearls that its contents, even in that rather dingy sunbeam, appeared to be delicately on fire.

Philip’s light blue eyes under their silken lashes continued to dwell on its charms in so spellbound a silence that for a moment the assistant thought the young man was about to swoon.

“Thank you very much,” said Philip at last, turning away with infinite reluctance and with a movement as graceful as that of a fawn, or of a *première danseuse* about to rest; “I will keep it in mind. You are sure the management can afford the reduction?”

Having made this rather airy comment, it seemed to Philip impolite, if not impossible, to ask the price of a “job line” of mock goatskin cigarette cases that were piled up in dreary disorder on a tray near at hand. So he passed out into the next department, which happened to be that devoted to goods described as “fancy,” though, so far as he could see, not very aptly.

Still he glanced around him as he hurried on, his heart bleeding for the unfortunates, old and helpless, or young and defenseless, doomed someday to welcome these exacerbating barbarous jocosities as gifts. But at sight of an obscure, puffy maroon object demon-

stratively labeled "Pochette: Art Nouveau," his very skin contracted, and he was all but about to inquire of a large veiled old lady with an ebony walking stick who was manfully pushing her away through this *mélange*, possibly in search of a *prie-dieu*, how such dreadful phenomena were "begot, how nourished," and was himself preparing to join in the chorus, when a little beyond it his glance alighted on a minute writing case, so frailly finished, so useless, so delicious to look at, handle, and smell, that even Titania herself might have paused to admire it. Philip eyed it with unconcealed gusto. His features had melted into the smile that so often used to visit them when as a little boy he had confided in his Uncle Charles that he preferred eclairs to doughnuts. Its price, he thought, was ridiculously moderate: only sixty-seven pounds ten shillings.

"It's the decor, sir—Parisian, of course—that makes it a trifle costly," the assistant was explaining. "But it's practical as well as sheek and would add distinction to *any young* lady's boudoir, bedchamber, or lap. The ink, as you see, sir, cannot possibly leak from the bottle if the case, that is, is held the right way up—so. The pencil, the '*Sans Merci*', as you observe, is of solid gold; and the pen, though we cannot guarantee the nib, is set with life-size turquoises. The flaps will hold at least six sheets of small-size notepaper, and envelopes to—or not to—match. And *here* is a little something, a sort of calendar, sir, by which you can tell the day of the week of any day of the month in any year in any century from one A.D. to nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine. It could then be renewed."

"M'm, very ingenious," Philip murmured, "and even Leap Year, I see. Is it unique, and so on?"

"No doubt of it, sir. As a matter of fact a lady from Philadelphia—the United States of America, sir—ordered fifty facsimilies, platinum mounts, of this very article—only yesterday afternoon; they get married a good deal over there, sir; wedding presents."

"Quite, thank you, no," said Philip, firmly but pleasantly. "They say there is safety in numbers, but there seems to be precious little else. Have you anything less reproducible?"

"Reproducible, sir? Why, naturally, sir. You see this is only a counter article. While catering for the many, sir, we are bound to keep an eye upon the few. For that very reason, the management prefer to have the costlier specimens under cover."

"Again, thank you," said Philip hurriedly. "What evils are done

in thy name, O Philadelphia! I may return later."

He emerged from the Fancy Goods Department, feeling at the same moment crestfallen and curiously elated. His mind, in fact, at this moment resembled a volcano the instant before its gloom is fated to burst into a blazing eruption. Though very hazily, he even recognized the danger he was in. So in hope to compose himself he sat down for a minute or two on a Madeira wicker chair intended perhaps by the management for this very purpose, and found himself gazing at a large black Chinese cat, in the glossiest of glazed earthenware, and as lifelike as Oriental artifice could make it. It was seated in a corner under a high potted palm, and it wore a grin upon its features that may have come from Cheshire, but which showed no symptom whatever of vanishing away. At sight of it—for Philip was not only partial to cats but knew the virtues of the black variety—a secret fiber seemed to have snapped in his head. "Good luck!" the creature smirked at him. And Philip smirked back. A flame of anguished defiance and desire had leapt up in his body. He would show his uncle what was what. He would learn him to cut nephews off with shillings. He would dare and do and die!

He rose, refreshed and renewed. It was as if he had tossed off a bumper of Veuve Clicquot of 1066. He must himself have come over with the Conqueror. A shopwalker lurking near was interrupted in the middle of an enormous gape by the spectacle of this Apollonian young figure now entering his department—Pianofortes and American Organs. There was something in the leopard-like look of him, something so princely and predatory in his tread, that this Mr. Jackson would have been almost ready to confess that he was moved. Frenchily dark and Frenchily sleek, he bowed himself almost double.

"Yes, sir?" he remarked out loud.

"I want, I think, a pianoforte," said Philip. "A grand."

"Thank you, sir; this way, please. Grand pianofortes, Mr. Smithers."

"I want a grand piano," repeated Philip to Mr. Smithers, an assistant with a slight cast in his left eye and an ample gingerish mustache. But in spite of these little handicaps Philip liked him much better than Mr. Jackson. A faraway glimpse of Mrs. Smithers and of all the little Smitherses seated round their Sunday leg of mutton at Hackney or at Brondesbury, maybe, had flashed into his mind.

"Grands, sir," cried Mr. Smithers, moving his mustache up and down with a curious rotary constriction of the lips; "this way, please."

The young man was conducted along serried ranks of grands. They stood on their three legs, their jaws tight shut, as mute as troops on parade. Philip paced on and on, feeling very much like the late Duke of Cambridge reviewing a regiment of his guards. He paused at length in front of a "Style 8; 7 ft. 9 in., square-legged, black-wood, mahogany-trimmed Bismarck."

"It *looks* spacious," he smiled amiably. "But the finish! And why overhung?"

"Overstrung, sir?" said Mr. Smithers. "That's merely a manner of speaking, sir, relating solely to its inside. But this, of course, is not what we specificate as a *grand* grand. For tone and timbre and resonance and pedal work and solidity and *wear*—there isn't a better on the market. I mean on the rest of the market. And if you were having in mind an everlasting instrument for the nursery or for a practice room—and we supply the new padded partitioning—this would be precisely the instrument, sir, you were having in mind. The young are sometimes a little hard on pianofortes, sir. They mean well, but they are but children after all; and—"

"Now let—me—think," Philip interposed. "To be quite candid, I wasn't having anything of that sort in mind. My sentiments are English for the English; and Bismarck, you know, though in girth and so on a remarkable man, was in other respects, a little—well, miscellaneous. It is said that he mixed his champagne with stout—or was it cocoa? On the other hand, I have no wish to be insular, and I *may* order one of these concoctions later—for a lady: the niece, as a matter of fact, of a governess of my uncle Colonel Crompton Pim's when he was young—as young at least as it was possible for him to be—who is, I believe, thinking of taking—of taking in—pupils. But we will see to that later. Have you anything that I could really look at?"

Mr. Smithers's mustaches twirled like a weathercock. "Why, yes, sir. Just now we are up to our eyes in pianos—flooded; and if I may venture to say so, sir, Bismarck was never no friend of *mine*. All this," and he swept his thumb in the direction of the avenue of instruments that stretched behind them, "they may be grands, but they're most of them foreign, and if you want a little something as nice to listen to as it is natty to look at, and *not* a mere menadjery fit only for an 'awl, there is a little what they call a harpsichord

over yonder, sir. It's a bijou model, de Pompadour case, hand-painted throughout—cupids and scallops and whatnot, all English gut, wire, metal, and jacks, and I defy any dealer in London to approximate it, sir, in what you might call pure form. No noise and all music, sir, and that *mellow* you scarcely know where to look. A lady's instrument—a titled lady's. And only seven hundred and seventy-seven guineas, sir, all told."

"Is it unique?" Philip inquired.

"Unique, sir? There's not another like it in Europe."

Philip smiled at Mr. Smithers very kindly out of his blue eyes. "But what about America?" he said.

The assistant curved what seemed an almost unnecessarily large hand round his lips. "Between you and me, sir, if by America," he murmured, "you're meaning the United States, why, Messrs. Montferas & de Beauguyou refuse to ship in that direction. It ruins their tone. In fact, sir, they are what's called *difficult*. They make for nobody and nowhere but as a favor; and that instrument over there was built for—"

He whispered the sesame so low that water rustling on a pebbled beach would have conveyed to Philip tidings more intelligible. But by the look in Mr. Smithers's eye Philip guessed that the lady in question moved in a lofty, though possibly a narrow, circle.

"Ah!" he said; "then that settles it. A home away from home. Charity begins there. I shall want it tomorrow. I shall want them both tomorrow. I mean the pianos. And perhaps a more democratic instrument for the servants' hall. But I will leave that to you."

Mr. Smithers pretended not to goggle. "Why, yes, sir, that can be easily arranged. In London, I *ho*—conjecture?"

"In London," said Philip, "Grosvenor Square." For at that very instant, as if at the summons of a genie, there had wafted itself into his memory the image of a vacant and "highly desirable residence," which his casual eye had glanced upon only the afternoon before, and which had proclaimed itself "to be let."

"Grosvenor Square, sir; oh yes, sir?" Mr. Smithers was ejaculating, order book in hand. "I will arrange for their removal at once. The three of them—quite a nice little set, sir."

"Pim, Crompton, Colonel," chanted Philip. "R-O-M, deferred account; *thank* you. Four four four, yes, four hundred and forty-four, Grosvenor Square. I am—that is, *we* are furnishing there."

But his gentle emphasis on the "we" was so courtly in effect that it sounded more like an afterthought than a piece of information.

Nevertheless it misled Mr. Smithers. Intense fellow-feeling beamed from under his slightly overhung forehead. "And I am sure, sir, if I may make so bold, I wish you both every happiness. I am myself of a matrimonial turn. And regret it, sir? *never!* I always say if every—"

"That's very kind indeed of you," said Philip, averting his young cheek, which having flushed had now turned a little pale. "And if I may be so bold, I am perfectly certain Mrs. Smithers is of the same way of thinking. Which is the best way to the Best Man's Department, if I take in Portmanteaux and the Fancies on my way?"

Mr. Smithers eyed him with the sublimest admiration. "Straight through, sir, on the left beyond them Chappels. On the same floor, but right out on the farther side of the building. As far as you can go."

"That is exactly what I was beginning to wonder—precisely how far I can go. This little venture of mine is a rather novel experience, and at the moment I am uncertain of its issue. But tell me, why is it our enterprising American friends have not yet invented a *lat-eral* lift?"

"Now, that's passing strange, too, sir; for I've often fancied it myself," said Mr. Smithers. "But you see in a department like this there's not much time for quiet thought, sir, with so much what you might call hidden din about. As a matter of fact, when I was younger, sir—and that happens to us all—I did invent a harmonium key-stifler—rubber, and pith, and wool—*so*—and a small steel spring, quite neat and entirely unnoticeable. But the manufacturers wouldn't look at it; not they!"

"I don't believe," said Philip, folding up his bill, "they ever look at anything. Not closely, you know. But if ever I do buy a harmonium," he put his head a little on one side and again smiled at Mr. Smithers, "I shall insist on the stifler. I suppose," he added reflectively, "you haven't by any chance a nice pedigree Amati or Stradivarius in stock? I have a little weakness for fiddles."

Mr. Smithers, leaning heavily on the counter on both his thumbs, smiled, but at the same time almost imperceptibly shook his head.

"I fancied it was unlikely," said Philip. "What's that over there; in the glass case, I mean?"

"That, sir?" said Mr. Smithers, twinkling up, "in that glass case there? That's a harp, sir. And a lovely little piece *that* is. Child's

size, sir. What they call minnychoore, and well over a century old, but still as sweet as a canary. It was made, so they say, for Mozart, the composer, sir, as you might be aware, in 1781, and up in the top corner is scratched the letters A.W. No doubt of it, sir—A.W. I've seen a picture of the mite myself playing like an angel in his nightcap, and not a day over seven; you'd hardly believe it, and his parents coming in at the door. Surprising. Then Schumann, *he* had it, sir—I mean the harp; and Schumann, though I don't know how he could dissuade himself to part with it, *he* passed it on to Brahms, another composer—and very much thought of even though a bit nearer *our* day. But you'll find it all neatly set out on the brass label at the foot. It's all there, sir. There's many a custo—"

"Indeed!" said Philip; "Brahms, Schumann, Mozart, what scenes we are recalling! And here it rests at last. The knacker's yard. How very, very sad. Why, of course, Mr. Smithers, we must have that sent on, too—and packed very, very carefully. Is the glass case extra?"

Mr. Smithers gulped. "I am exceedingly sorry, sir," he said, "exceedingly sorry, but it's not for sale—I mean—*except* the case."

"Not for sale," retorted Philip impulsively. "But what is the use, Mr. Smithers, of a mercenary institution like this unless everything in it is for sale? You cannot mean for raw advertisement?"

Mr. Smithers was covered with confusion. "I am sure, sir," he said, "that the directors would do their utmost to consider your wishes. They would be very happy to do so. But if you will excuse my mentioning it, I should myself very much miss that harp. I have been in this department thirteen years now . . . My little boy . . . It is the only thing . . ."

It was Philip's turn to be all in confusion. "Good gracious me, I quite understand," he said; "not another word, Mr. Smithers. I wouldn't *think* of pressing the point. Nonetheless I can assure you that even if it *had* been for sale I should always have welcomed you whenever you cared to come to Grosvenor Square and take another look at it. And, of course, your little boy, too—*all* your little boys."

Mr. Smithers appeared to be lost in gratitude. "If only," he began, a light that never was on sea or land in his eye—but words failed him.

At the other end of the "Chappels" Philip again encountered the walker, Mr. Jackson, still looking as much like a self-possessed

bridegroom as it is possible for a high collar and a barber to achieve.

"I see," said Philip, "you exhibit specimens of the tuberphone (and, by the way, I would suggest *a* instead of *er*), the tubaphone, the clog-box, and the Bombaboo, iniquities at the same time negroid and old fashioned, but though in a recent visit to Budapest I found even the charming little linden-shaded shops—along the Uffelgang, you know, not, of course, a fashionable part of the city—crammed with models of the 'Haba-Stein,' a microtonic instrument with five keyboards and Hindu effects, intended, of course, for the polytonal decompositions of the 'Nothing-but-Music' school—*most* interesting—I see *no* trace of it here. I am a neoteromantic, but still, we must keep abreast, we must keep abreast!"

He waved a not unfriendly glove over his head, smiled, and went on.

Mr. Smithers had also watched the slim grey young figure until it had turned the corner and was out of sight. He then had a word with his "floor chief."

"Pim, eh, Crompton," said Mr. Jackson, squinting morosely at his underling's open order book. "'Setting up house'? Then I suppose the old gent must have sent in his checks. Not that I'm surprised this nephew of his hasn't bought his black yet. Close-fisted, purple-nosed, peppery old—! There won't be many to cry their eyes out over *his* arums and gardenias."

Mr. Smithers, being a family man, felt obliged to seem to enjoy as much as possible his immediate chief's society.

"All I can say *is*," he ventured, "that young feller, and he's a gentleman if ever there was one, is making it fly."

He *was*. At that moment Philip was assuring Assistant No. 6 in the Portmanteau Department that unless the Maharaja of Jolhopolloluli's dressing case could be dispatched next day to reach No. 444 Grosvenor Square by tea time he need not trouble. "A few other little things," he explained, "are being sent at the same time." No. 6 at once hastened to the house telephone and asked for the secretary's office. The line was engaged.

But he need not have hesitated, for when a young man with a Pim for an uncle and of so much suavity and resources makes his wishes known, this world is amiability itself. Philip was warming up. However bland in outward appearance, he was by this time at a very enlivening temperature. He had tasted blood, as the saying goes; and he was beginning to see the need of setting a good exam-

ple. Customers, like the coneys, are usually a feeble folk. His little sortie was turning into a crusade.

By this time he had all but finished disporting himself in the Furniture Department. "Three large drawing rooms, one of them extensive," had run his rather naked catalogue, "a ballroom, a dining room, a breakfast room, and a little pretty dumpy all-kinds-of-angles morning room with a Cherubini ceiling and a Venetian chimneypiece, eighteenth century, in lapis lazuli and glass. Bed-rooms, let me see, say, twenty-two—just to go on with (but not in), eleven of them for personal use, and the rest, staff. That, I think, will do for the present. We face east or west as the case may be; and nothing, please, of the 'decorative,' the quaint, or the latest thing out. Nothing shoddy, shapeless, or sham. I dislike the stuffy and the fussy and mere trimmings; and let the beds be *beds*. Moreover, I confess to being sadly disappointed in the old, the 'antique,' furniture you have shown me. The choice is restricted, naive, and incongruous, and I have looked in vain for anything that could not be easily rivaled in the richer museums. However, let there be as many so-called antique pieces as possible, and those as antique as you can manage. Period, origin, design, harmony—please bear these in mind."

The assistants, clustering round him, bowed.

"If I have time I will look through the department again on my way down. Eight hundred guineas for the cheaper of the Chippendale four-posters seems a little exorbitant; and three hundred and fifty for the William and Mary wallglass—I fear it's been resilvered and patched. Still, I agree that you can but do your best—I say you can all of you but do your best—and I must put up with that. What I *must* insist on, however, is that everything I have mentioned—everything—must be in its place tomorrow afternoon—carpets and so on will, of course, precede them—by four o'clock. And let there be no trace left of that indescribable odor of straw and wrappings—from Delhi, I should think—which accompanies removals. Four forty-four Grosvenor Square. Pim—Crompton—Colonel: R—O—M. Thank you. To the left? *Thank you.*"

This "floor-chief" hastened on in front of his visitor as if he were a Gehazi in attendance on a Naaman, and the young man presently found himself in a scene overwhelmingly rich with the colors, if not the perfumes, of the Orient. Here a complete quarter of an hour slid blissfully by. Mere wooden furniture, even when adorned with gilt, lacquer, ivory, or alabaster, can be disposed of with moderate

ease; and especially if the stock of the tolerable is quickly exhausted. But Persian, Chinese, if not Turkey, carpets are another matter.

Philip sat erect on a gimcrack gilded chair, his cane and hat in his left hand, his gloves in his right, while no less than three sturdy attendants in baize aprons at one and the same moment strewed their matchless offerings at his feet, and an infuriated and rapidly multiplying group of would-be customers in search of floorcloth, lino, and coconut matting stood fuming beyond. But first come, first served is a good old maxim, and even apart from it Philip was unaware of their company. He lifted not so much as an eyebrow in their direction.

In the meantime, however, the cash balance in his uncle's bank, and much else besides, had long since as rapidly vanished as the vapor from a locomotive on a hot summer's day. From the Carpet Department, vexed that time allowed him only one of London's chief treasuries to ransack—such are the glories of Bokhara and Ispahan—he hastened down to the wine counters. Here, childishly confident in the cellarage of No. 444, Philip indulged a pretty palate *not* inherited from his uncle: claret, burgundy, hock, sherry, cherry brandy, green chartreuse, and similar delicate aids to good talk and reflection. He was ingenuous but enthusiastic. Port he ignored.

From Wines he made his way through the galleries exhibiting curtains and "hangings" (he shuddered), and china and glass—"most discouraging." His spirits revived a little when yet another defunct and barbaric prince, this time from Abyssinia, supplied him in the Car Department with a vehicle whose only adequate use, to judge from the modesty of its dashboard, the simplicity of its engine, and its price, would be a journey from this world into the next. Nevertheless His Highness had left it behind.

Fleeting visits to counters bristling with ironmongery, turnery, kitchen utensils, and provisions—and from motives of principle he omitted all mention of mulligatawny paste, chutney, West Indian pickles, and similar fierce and barbarous comestibles—vanished out of memory like the patterns of a kaleidoscope. The rather noisy annex reserved for livestock Philip left unvisited. After deserts of dead stock it sounded inviting, but Philip's was a dainty nose and he was sorry for orang-utans.

So too with books. He had clear convictions of what a gentleman's library should be without, but decided that it would take more

leisure than he could spare this morning to expound them. Even the sight of a Work of Reference, however, is an excellent sedative; he ordered the choicest of who's-whos, dictionaries, atlases, encyclopedias, bird, flower, and cookery books—with a copy of *Bradshaw*—and retired.

As for pictures and statuary, one anguished glance into the dreadful chambers devoted to the fine arts had sent him scurrying on like a March hare. Nor, as he rather sadly realized, had he any cause to linger at the portals of the Monumental Masonry Department, and he now suddenly found himself in the midst of a coruscating blaze of the precious metals and the still more precious stones. He had strayed into Jewelry—a feast for Aladdin. Gold in particular—goblets and bowls and tankards, plates, platters, and dishes of it; clocks, chronometers, watches—from massive turnips, memorial of the Georges, to midgets like a three-penny piece in crystal and enamel, many of them buzzing like bees, and all of them intent on the kind of time which is *not* wild or always nectarous, but of which Philip had always supposed there was an inexhaustible supply. But not, alas, for all purposes. Indeed, these officious reminders of the actual hour had for the first time a little scared him.

In the peculiar atmosphere that hangs over any abundant array of sago, cooked meats, candles, biscuits, coffee, tea, ginger, and similar wares, he had been merely a young bachelor on the brink of an establishment. But at sight of this otiose display of gewgaws in the lamplit mansion in which he now found himself, his fancy had suddenly provided him with a bride. She was of a fairness incomparably fair. The first faint hint of this eventuality had almost unnerved him. He lost his head and—his heart being unconcerned—his taste also. In tones as languid as the breezes of Arabia he had at once ordered her rings, bracelets, necklaces, pendants, brooches, earrings, not to speak of bediamonded plumes and tiaras, that would daunt the dreams even of the complete bevy of musical comedy young ladies on the British stage—not to mention that of Buenos Aires. And then, oddly enough, he had come to himself, and paused.

At the very moment of opening his mouth in repetition of a solo with which he was now entirely familiar—"R-O-M," and so on—he sat instead, gaping at the tall, calm, bald, venerable old gentleman on the other side of the counter. He had flushed.

"Have you," he inquired almost timidly at last, his eyes fixed on

a chastely printed list of cutlery and silverware that lay on the glass case at his elbow, "have you just one really simple, lovely, rare, precious, and well, unique little trinket suitable for a lady? Young, you know? An *un*-birthday present?"

The old gentleman looked up, looked at, looked *in*, smiled fondly, reminiscently, and, selecting a minute key on a ring which he had drawn out of his pocket, opened a safe not half a dozen yards away. "We have this," he said.

"This," at first, was a little fat morocco-leather case. He pressed the spring. Its lid flew open. And for an instant Philip's eyesight failed him. But it was not so much the suppressed lustre of the jewels within that had dazed his imagination as the delicate marvel of their setting. They lay like lambent dewdrops on the petals of a flower. The old gentleman gazed, too.

"The meaning of the word 'simple,' " he suggested ruminatively, "is one of many degrees. This, sir, is a Benvenuto Cellini piece." He had almost whispered the last few syllables as if what in workmanship were past all rivalry was also beyond any mortal pocket; as if, in fact, he were telling secrets of the unattainable. The tone piqued Philip a little.

"It is charming," he said. "But have you nothing then of Jacques de la Tocquéville's, or of Rudolph von Himmeldommer's, nothing of—dear me, the name escapes me. The earlier Florentine, you will remember, no doubt referred to in *Sordello*, who designed the chryselephantine bowl for the Botticelli wedding feast. But never mind. Nothing Greek? Nothing Etruscan—*poudre d'or*? Are you suggesting that the Winter Palace was thrice looted in vain?"

The old gentleman was accustomed to the airs and graces of fastidious clients and merely smiled. He had not been listening very intently. "You will appreciate the difficulty, sir, of keeping anything but our more trifling pieces actually within reach of the nearest burglar with a stick of gun cotton or an acetylene lamp. This"—he stirred the little leather case with his finger as lightly as a cat the relics of a mouse, and its contents seemed softly to sizzle in subdued flames of rose and amber and blue—"this," he said, "happens not to be our property. It is merely in our keeping. And though to an article of such nature it is absurd to put a price, we have been asked to dispose of it; and by—well, a client for whom we have the profoundest respect."

"I see"; Philip pondered coldly on the bauble, though his heart was a whirlwind of desire and admiration. He swallowed. The re-

mote tiny piping of a bird that was neither nightingale nor skylark, and yet might be either or both, had called to him as if from the shores of some paradise isle hidden in the mists of the future. He glanced up at the old gentleman, but his bald, long grey countenance was as impassive as ever.

"I'll take it," Philip said, and for a while could say no more. When speech was restored to him, he asked that it should be delivered not "with the other things," and not to any butler or majordomo or other crustacean that might appear in answer to a knock at No. 444, but by special messenger into his own personal private hands.

"Precisely, at half past four, if you please." The old gentleman bowed. As there was not enough room in the money column of his orderbook for the noughts, he had written in the price in longhand, and was engaged in printing the figures 444 in the place reserved for the customer's address, when a small but clearly actual little voice at Philip's elbow suddenly shrilled up into his ear—"Mr. Philip Pim, sir?" At echo of this summons Philip stood stock-still and stiff, his heart in his ears. "The sekkertary, sir," the piping voice piped on, "asks me to say he'd be much obliged if you would be so kind as to step along into his office on your way *hout*, sir."

The tone of this invitation, though a little Cockney in effect, was innocence and courtesy itself; yet at sound of it every drop of blood in Philip's body—though he was by no means a bloated creature—had instantly congealed. This was the end, then. His orgy was over. His morning of mornings was done. The afflatus that had wafted him on from floor to floor had wisped out of his mind like the smoke of a snuffed-out candle. Yet *still* the bright thought shook him: he had had a Run for his money. No—better than that: he had had a Run *gratis*.

He must collect his wits: they had gone woolgathering. At last he managed to turn his head and look down at the small, apple-cheeked, maroon-tunicked pageboy at his side—apple-cheeked, alas, only because he had but that week entered the sekkertary's service and his parents were of country stock.

"Tell Sir Leopold Bull"—Philip smiled at the infant—"that I will endeavor to be with him in the course of the afternoon. Thank you. That," he added for the ear of his friend on the other side of the counter, "that will be all."

But Philip was reluctant to leave him. These four syllables, as he had heard himself uttering them, sounded on in his ear with the finality of a knell. He was extremely dubious of what would

happen if he let go of the counter. His knees shook under him. A dizzy vacancy enveloped him in. With a faint wan smile at the old gentleman, who was too busily engaged in returning his treasures to the safe to notice it, he managed to edge away at last.

Every mortal thing around him, gilded ceiling to grandfather clock, was at this moment swaying and rotating, as will the ocean in the eyes of a seasick traveler gloating down upon it from an upper deck. He felt ill with foreboding.

But breeding tells. And courage is a mistress that has never been known to jilt a faithful heart. Philip was reminded of this as he suddenly caught sight of a sort of enormous purple beefeater, resembling in stature a Prussian dragoon, and in appearance a Javanese Jimjam. This figure stood on duty in the doorway, and appeared to be examining him as closely as if he were the heir to the English throne (or the most nefarious crook from Chicago). As Philip drew near he looked this monster full in his fishlike eye, since he was unable to do anything else. But try as he might he couldn't pass him in silence.

"Ask Sir Leopold Bull, please," he said, "to send an official to show me the way to his office. He will find me somewhere in the building."

"I can take you there myself," replied the giant hoarsely. He could indeed—bodily.

"Thank you," replied Philip. "I have no doubt of it. But I shall be much obliged if you would at once deliver my message."

He then groped his way to yet another wicker chair not many yards along a corridor festooned with knickknacks from Japan and the Near East, and clearly intended for speedy disposal. He eyed them with immense distaste and sat down.

"Nothing whatever, thank you," he murmured to a waitress who had approached him with a card containing a list of soft drinks. Never in his life had he so signally realized the joys of self-restraint. And though at the same moment he thrust finger and thumb into his waistcoat pocket in search of his Uncle Charles's last sovereign, it was with a view not to material but to moral support. Years before he had often tried the same device when as a small boy deadly afraid of the dark he had managed at last to thrust his fevered head up and out from under his bedclothes, and to emit a dreadful simulacrum of a croupy cough. He had never known it to fail of effect, and it was always nice to know his mother was *there*.

So, too, with his Uncle Charles's sovereign. It was nice to know it was there, though it was not the dark Philip was now afraid of but the light. Resting the ivory handle of his walking stick on his lower lip, he began to think. What would his sentence be? A first offender, but not exactly a novice. Not, at any rate, he hoped, in taste and judgment. Months or years? Hard labor or penal servitude? So swift is the imagination that in a few seconds Philip found himself not only—his sentence served, the smiling governor bidden farewell—*out* and a free man again, but fuming with rage that he had not managed to retain a single specimen of his spoils. The Jobbli dressing bag, for instance, or that tiny, that utterly and inimitably "unique" little Sheraton Sheridan writing desk.

He came back a little stronger from this expedition into the future. For reassurance, like hope, springs eternal in the human breast. His one regret was not so much that he had been found out (that might come later), but that he had been found out so soon. How much bolder, less humiliating, nobler, to have actually bearded that old curmudgeon of an uncle of his, swapp or bogey in hand, in his den!

That in any event he would have been "found out" on the morrow, as soon, that is, as the first van arrived at No. 444, he had realized long ago. He certainly would not have been found "in"! But even one brief night in May seems, in prospect, a long interval between being a Croesus and a felon in Pentonville.

He was recalled from these reflections by a young man whose sleek black hair was parted as neatly in front and in the middle as his morning coat was parted behind. A few paces distant, like a mass of gilded pudding-stone, stood the giant from the Jewelry Department. Were they in collusion? Philip could not decide.

"If you would step this way, sir, to the secretary's office," said the young man, "Sir Leopold Bull would be very much obliged."

Philip mounted to his feet and, though he flatly refused to step *that* way, followed him—to his doom. That, however, was not to be instantaneous, for on his arrival Sir Leopold Bull, rising from his rolltop desk with a brief but thrilling smile, first proffered a plump white hand to his visitor and then a chair. It seemed to be a needlessly polite preamble to the interview that was to follow. Philip ignored the hand but took the chair.

"Thank you," he said. "I do hope you will some day take my advice, Sir Leopold, to *simplify* the arrangement of this building. It is a perfect labyrinth, and I always miss my way." With a sigh

he sank down into the cushions. He was tired.

"My uncle, Colonel Crompton Pim," he continued, "is unable to spare a moment to see you this morning. I regret to say he strongly disapproved of the Bombay ducks, or was it the clam chowder, you sent him on Friday. They were beneath contempt."

Sir Leopold smiled once more, but even more placatingly. "I had the privilege of seeing Colonel Crompton Pim only yesterday afternoon," he replied. "He then expressed his satisfaction, for the time being, at the golf balls—the new Excelsior brand—with one of which we had the pleasure of supplying him *gratis* a week or two ago. The Bombay ducks shall be withdrawn immediately. I must apologize for not seeking you out in person, Mr. Pim, but what I have to say is somewhat of a private nature, and—"

"Yes," said Philip, realizing how thin was the end of the wedge which Sir Leopold was at this moment insinuating into the matter in hand. "Yes, quite." And he opened his innocent blue eyes as wide as he could, to prevent them from blinking. He kept them fixed, too, on the close-shaven face, its octopus-like mouth and prominent eyes, with ill-suppressed repulsion. To be a fly that had fallen a victim to such a spider as this!

"It would please me better," he went on, "if you would arrive as rapidly as possible at the matter you wish to discuss with me. I am free for five minutes, but I must beg you not to waste our time. And please tell your porter over there to go away. Scenes are distasteful to me."

The face of the porter, who seemed to have been created solely for his bulk, turned as crimson as a specimen of *sang-du-boeuf*. He appeared to be hurt at having been described as a "scene." But wages are of more importance than feelings, and he withdrew.

"You have had a busy morning, Mr. Pim," said the secretary. "No less than seven of my assistants who have had the privilege of waiting upon you have been monopolizing me for some time with telephone messages. I hope I am not being too intrusive if I venture to congratulate you, sir, on what I suppose to be Colonel Crompton Pim's approaching—"

"Candidly, Sir Leopold," said Philip firmly, "that *would* be venturing too far. Much too far. Let us say no more about it. What precise charge are you intending to bring against me?"

There was a pause while the world continued to rotate.

"For which article?" breathed Sir Leopold.

Philip gazed steadily at the full, bland, secretive countenance.

It was as if once again he had heard that seraphic birdlike voice sounding in the remote blue sky above the stormclouds that now hung so heavily over his beating heart.

"Oh, I mean for delivery," he said. "Mine was—was a large order."

"But, my dear sir, we shouldn't dream of making *any* such charge. *Any* service to Colonel Pim . . ." The faint sob in the voice would have done credit to Caruso.

Philip stooped to hide the cataract of relief that had swept over his face, then raised his head again. How could he be sure that this was anything more than playacting—the torture of suspense? "Ah, well," he said, "that is no matter now. I gather there was some other point you had in mind—in *view*, I should say."

"Oh, only," said Sir Leopold, "to ask if Colonel Pim would be so kind as to subscribe as usual to our Fund for the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Offspring of Superannuated Shop Assistants. Mainly orphans, Mr. Pim. We must all die, Mr. Pim, and some of us have to die earlier in life than others. Still, our average here is little worse than that of any other large London establishment. In Petrograd—or was it Los Angeles?—I am given to understand, a shop assistant at two and thirty is a shop assistant with at least one foot in the grave. It is the little orphans, the fatherless ones, who from no apparent fault of their own have to be left to the tender mercies of a busy world! It would grieve you, sir, which Heaven forbid, if I told you how many of these wee small things there are now on our hands. Chubby, joysome, rosebud little creatures, as happy as the day is long. Nevertheless, it is a little thoughtless to marry, Mr. Pim, when it is only orphans one can leave behind one. On the other hand, there is a silver lining to *every* cloud. Without these infants we should be deprived of a good cause. An excellent cause. And it's causes that keep us going. Last year I think Colonel Pim very kindly contributed half a guinea."

"In cash?" Philip inquired sharply.

"We debited his account," said Sir Leopold.

"Well, then," said Philip, "please understand that my uncle *re-grets* that little laxity. He has hardened. He now entirely disapproves of orphans and of orphanages. The shop assistant, he was saying to me only the other day, is a person who should be grateful to Providence that he has *no* justification for dabbling in matrimony. The more celibate they are, in his opinion, the better. But recollect, Sir Leopold, that until we arrive at the higher and fewer

salaried officials in your establishment, I feel myself in no way bound to *share* my uncle's views. Your staff is as courteous and considerate as it appears to be unappreciated. A man's a man for a' that. And a' that. Let us talk of brighter things."

Sir Leopold did his utmost to conceal the wound to his vanity. "I am sorry to seem to be persistent," he assured his client, "but Colonel Pim only yesterday was so kind as to say he would *consider* my appeal. I take it, then, that he has changed his mind?"

"My uncle," retorted Philip tartly, "has a mind that is the better for being changed." For an instant he saw the face before him as it would appear in due course in the witness box; and his very soul revolted. That pitiless Machine called Society might have its merits, but not *this* cog in its wheel! "I myself implored my uncle," he added bitterly, "to give the orphans the cold shoulder. What in the chronic sirocco of his next world would be the use to him of a mere half-guinea's worth of cooling breezes? Scarcely a sop in the pan. Indeed, only a passion for the conventional prevented him from asking for his previous donations to be returned."

Sir Leopold appeared to be engaged in rapidly bolting something—possibly his pride. It was at any rate no part of his secretarial duties to detect insanity in the family of any solvent shareholder.

"There is only one other little point," he went on rather hollowly. "Colonel Pim asked me to send him a detailed account of his purchases during the last month. We met by happy chance as he was yesterday alighting from a taxicab at the entrance to his bank. After today's purchases that will perhaps take an hour or two. But it shall reach him tomorrow morning—without fail."

Philip had risen. It is better to stand when one is at bay. While with a gentle absent smile he stood drawing on his gloves he was faced with the wildest effort of his life—to make sure of what lay in hiding behind these last remarks. Anything *might*.

"Oh, he did—did he?" he remarked very softly. "I fancy—" and at last he lifted his gentle eyes to meet his adversary's—"I *believe* there's an empty whisky jar that has not yet been credited to him. Perhaps that was on his mind."

"Well, Mr. Pim," said Sir Leopold, "turning" at last, "if *that's* his only jar it's soon adjusted."

Philip took a deep breath. He playfully wagged a finger.

"Now *that*, Sir Leopold," he said, "was blank verse. I hope you don't intend to put my little purchases of this morning into *rhyme*!"

The effort, I assure you, would be wasted on my uncle."

He wheeled lightly, and turned towards the door. Sir Leopold, his face now at liberty to resume its office of expressing his feelings, accompanied him. Indeed he continued to accompany him to the very entrance of his gigantic abode. And there Philip almost fainted. A deluge, compared with which that of Noah and his family was nothing but an April shower, was descending on the street.

"A taxi," roared Sir Leopold at a group of his satellites in the porch, caparisoned in shiny waterproofs, and armed with gigantic *parapluies*.

But though at least nineteen of these vehicles were instantly battling their way towards this goal, Philip with incredible agility had eluded their attention. Before Sir Leopold had had time even to arrange his face to smile a farewell, our young friend had gone leaping up the staircase behind him, and had without a moment's pause vanished into the Tropical Department. One fugitive glance at its pith and pukka contents, and at the dusky assistants in attendance, had only accelerated his retreat. In less than half a minute he found himself confronting a young woman seated in midst of a stockade of umbrellas.

The coincidence was too extreme to be ignored. He would at least carry off *some* little souvenir of his morning's outing. What better value could he get for hard cash than an implement that would be at the same time a refuge from the elements—for other he would soon presently have none—and a really formidable weapon at hand for his next interview with Sir Leopold?

He had but just enough breath left to express himself. He pointed.

"I *want* one, please," he cried at the young woman. "Cash."

"One, two, three, four, *five* guineas?" she murmured, looking as if she were less in need of her stock than of her lunch. "Partridge, malacca, horn, ivory, rhinoceros, natural, *gold*? Union, gloria, glacé, taffeta, cotton, mixture, or *twill*?"

"Not a toy; an umbrella," Philip expostulated. "To keep off rain. A nephew returning to school—ten years' wear. Gingham, alpaca, calico, cast iron—*anything*; so long as it is hefty, solid, endurable, awful, and *cheap*."

"We have here what is *called* an umbrella," replied the assistant a trifle coldly. "The Miss and Master Brand Lignum vitae stick, whalebone ribs, blunted ferrule, nonpoisonous handle, guaranteed not to break, fray, fade, or scale. Nine and elevenpence complete."

"Bill; in haste; cash; just as it is; thanks," cried Philip, and seized the dreadful object. With a groan he laid his Uncle Charles's sovereign in the narrow brass trough of the paydesk. The obese young person in the wooden box seemed about to lift it to her lips, glanced at him again, put it aside, smiled, and gave him his change.

"The way to the back exit, I think, is over here?" Philip murmured, waving his gloves due west.

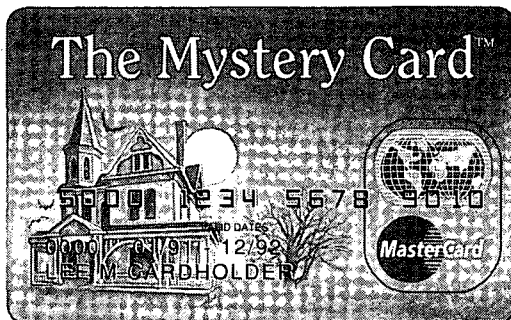
The young person smiled again, and he withdrew. He withdrew down the back steps and into the deluge; there to face a watery world, the possessor of ten shillings and a penny (in his pocket), a wardrobe of old suits, about a hundred and fifty books, three of them unmerited prizes for good conduct, a juvenile collection of postage stamps, a hypothetical legacy of a shilling, and an uncle who, if he faced his liabilities as an English gentleman should, had to all intents and purposes overdrawn his bank account that afternoon by, say roughly, a couple of hundred thousand pounds.

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":

1. CARNATION, florist, owned by Daisy, stolen by Buddy from First Avenue.
2. CARDINAL, naturalist, owned by Forrest, stolen by Woody from Fourth Street.
3. CARBOHYDRATE, dietitian, owned by Calvin, stolen by Slim Jim from Main Street.
4. CARNIVAL, barker, owned by Bob, stolen by Sheppard from Third Avenue.
5. CARTOON, illustrator, owned by Arthur, stolen by Drew from Fifth Avenue.

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Variable Rate 16.4%	Your Annual Percentage rate may vary. The Rate is determined by adding 7.9% to the New York Prime Rate as published in the <i>Wall Street Journal</i> on the first Friday of the preceding month.	Not less than 25 days
Method of Computing the Balance for Purchases	Annual Fee	Minimum Finance Charge
Two-cycle Average Daily Balance Excluding New Purchases	\$20.00*	50¢ If it would otherwise be greater than zero and less than 50¢

Other Charges

Over-the-Credit-Limit Fee: \$15
Cash Advances: 2% (minimum \$2, maximum \$10)
Return Check Fee: \$15
Late Payment Fee: 5% of each payment due or \$5, whichever is lower

***There is no Annual Fee for the first year.**

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APPLICANT INFORMATION					001-003-00003
FIRST NAME	INITIAL	LAST NAME			
DATE OF BIRTH	SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER		HOME PHONE		
____/____/____	____-____-____		(____) ____-____		
ADDRESS	CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE	YEARS THERE	
PREVIOUS ADDRESS	CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE	YEARS THERE	
PRESENT EMPLOYER		WORK PHONE		YEARS THERE	
		(____) ____-____			
PREVIOUS EMPLOYER (if with present employer less than one year)		WORK PHONE		YEARS THERE	
		(____) ____-____			
GROSS ANNUAL INCOME*	TOTAL MONTHLY PAYMENTS (INCLUDE HOME, CAR, PERSONAL, CREDIT CARD LOANS, ETC.)		PREFERRED CREDIT LIMIT		
\$ _____	\$ _____		\$ _____		
NEAREST RELATIVE NOT LIVING WITH ME		RELATIONSHIP	TELEPHONE		
			(____) ____-____		
CO-APPLICANT INFORMATION					
FIRST NAME	INITIAL	LAST NAME			
DATE OF BIRTH	SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER		HOME PHONE		
____/____/____	____-____-____		(____) ____-____		
ADDRESS	CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE	YEARS THERE	
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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Sheila Smith

The books reviewed this month all have a fine sense of place, describing the geography and atmosphere unique to locations around this nation of ours.

Lucy Stone has a job taking telephone orders for the Country Cousins catalogue. A lot of the women in Tinker's Cove, Maine, have jobs at Country Cousins, especially during the pre-Christmas season, and the money earned can be substantial, what with bonuses and all. But Lucy finds the Country Cousins' founder, beloved Sam Miller, dead in his BMW in the parking lot late one night. She feels a certain responsibility toward the "case," even though it looks like suicide at first. When Sam's demise puts his less popular brother in charge, underlings like George Higham begin to rise in the power structure, and many of the telephone operators find themselves inexplicably laid off. Lucy smells a rat. Maine at Christmas, with likeable characters like Lucy Stone, her husband and kids and pets, and Sue Finch, her neighbor who can do it all, make this an enjoyable read. **Mail-Order Murder** (Viking, \$18.95, 198 pp) is Leslie Meier's first novel.

Another first novel is **Carpool** by Mary Cahill (Random House, \$19.00, 258 pp). The heroine is Jenny Meade, ex-pilot and current carpool champion of Clark County (near Washington, D.C.). Jenny is beginning to worry—she has been drifting off while driving, imagining that her silver Honda is an airplane and she is back in the medical shuttle business. Not that there's a chance of that. Her less than sympathetic husband seems to feel that all would be easier for Jenny if she only had a *big* station wagon. But it's not, the car size; it's the frustrating, boring routine of it all. Jenny's favorite place to unwind is the hill in the middle of the cemetery

because it is peaceful and isolated and she can daydream there without causing a wreck. That is spoiled, however, when she finds the hanged body of the young handyman from whom she has traditionally bought cordwood. Suicide; there's even a note. But why? And what explains all the other strange happenings around Clark County these days? *Carpool* is witty, downright funny in places, with a sinister background involving past accidents/murders, espionage, real estate scams, and numerous seemingly incompetent police officers.

Detective Eustes Tully is Santa Barbara's best detective. He likes junk food and is an expert on the various takeout joints in the area. He drives a beige Chevy Nova, lives in a bachelor apartment, and is developing an ulcer. He is competing with Braumeister for the next promotion, and when a series of murder victims begin turning up on the beach, he finds himself sabotaged in the investigation from every direction. Finally, his superior removes him from the case in favor of Braumeister. This is the scene in Bruce Jones's first novel **In Deep** (Crown, \$19.00, 306 pp). Told from several perspectives—that of Tully, of the serial killer, and of several potential suspects—*In Deep* explores the motivations of Tully as he investigates on his own time, fitting the case in around another assignment for Narcotics. The tale is taut and suspenseful, and the culprit is not identified until the last few pages. It will be interesting to see if Tully's career survives this investigation.

J. F. Freedman has written a first novel, **Against the Wind** (Viking, \$19.95, 423 pp), that is really several books in one. Will Alexander, star criminal defense lawyer in the Albuquerque firm he co-owns with Andy Portillo (corporate) and Fred Hite (civil), is confronted by his partners and asked to take a leave of absence, preparatory to their buying him out. His drinking and womanizing have begun to affect his work, and key appointments have been missed. Rather than alerting him to his problem, the confrontation results in Will's being belligerent and spiteful. His attempts to come to terms with this ultimate "betrayal" is the thread that holds three "plots" together: (1) Will defends, unsuccessfully, three bikers accused of murder and rape; (2) he negotiates a settlement in a prison riot in which the convicted bikers are participants; and (3) he manages to get the murder case reopened. Good courtroom tension and lots of desert scenery.

Oklahoma is well presented by Susan Rogers Cooper's **Chasing Away the Devil** (St. Martin's, \$16.95), perhaps the best install-

ment in her series about Deputy Sheriff Milt Kovak. In this book, we look deeper into Milt's life and the lives of his family and friends, deeper than Milt would wish. His longstanding relationship with waitress Glenda Sue is over—she has been found brutally murdered and, strangely enough, Milt is a suspect. Milt discovers that there was more to Glenda Sue than he knew, that his best friend from his childhood had a secret she didn't tell anyone, even in dying. Her death touches Milt in other ways as well—he begins having a strange recurring dream, his house is vandalized, and his sister Jewel develops a relationship with her old childhood love. Susan Rogers Cooper has an uncanny way of getting inside the head of her sheriff, making him real to the reader. A must read in a highly recommended series.

Black humor and incongruous situations are the hallmarks of Carl Hiassen's Florida novels. The latest, **Native Tongue** (Knopf, \$21.00, 322 pp), is set in a fictional theme park in the Florida Keys. The park, *Amazing Kingdom*, is run by a nasty little man with no past who has hired Joe Winder, ex-journalist, as a public relations hack. Joe's press releases attempt to lure visitors away from the better known (and less sleazy) theme parks to the north. But how do you write releases that will keep people coming when your killer whale actually kills people, your dolphin sexually assaults its keepers (and members of the press), your endangered blue-tongued mango voles are kidnapped and brutally murdered, and wacko environmental groups are picketing your park, protesting the impending destruction of mangroves for your new golf course development? Joe doesn't—not very well—but somehow *Amazing Kingdom's* denizens don't realize the trouble they're in. Typical Hiassen—a strong “save Florida” message couched in strange characters, convoluted plots, and absolutely hysterical situations.

A Chicago suburb is the setting for Jill Churchill's **A Farewell to Yarns** (Avon, \$3.99, 214 pp). Widowed Jane Jeffry has agreed to make an afghan for the Christmas bazaar and has volunteered to help run the bazaar from the home of neighbor and new friend Fiona Howard, the widow of rock star Richie Divine. Jane is feeling a bit overwhelmed—on top of all this, she also is having an unexpected house guest. An old friend from the early days of her marriage is coming to visit. It really doesn't surprise Jane that someone is soon killed, but she expected it to be her guest's uninvited, obnoxious son, not the guest herself. The crime puts Jane back into contact with Detective Mel Van Dyne (from the earlier *Grime and*

Punishment, Bantam, 1989, soon to be re-released by Avon) as she meddles in the investigation, all the while taking the bazaar in stride.

New Orleans stars in Julie Smith's **The Axeman's Jazz** (St. Martin's, \$19.95, 341 pp). New Orleans cop Skip Langdon is now working homicide, thanks to her success in *New Orleans Mourning*. But maybe that's not such a good thing—this is still an embarrassment to her family. And now she's involved in a serial murder case that recalls "The Axeman," a serial killer in 1919 New Orleans. Someone is murdering people who have no apparent connection with each other and is threatening to continue to do so unless everyone has a jazz party on a specific date. Skip finds herself undercover in various self-help, twelve-step groups, looking for connections and discovering things about herself and her family that she was completely unaware of. An excellent sense of New Orleans.

Claire Malloy is back in Joan Hess's **Roll Over and Play Dead** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 244 pp), and so is Arkansas. Claire is still running The Book Depot and trying to deal with her teenage daughter. She is also house-sitting for customer Emily Parchester, watering the African violets and feeding two ugly basset hounds. When daughter Caron demands money, Claire assigns her the house-sitting chores, only to find that the dogs are missing. This could cause her to lose a valued customer. Little does she know it could also lead to murder by pit bull, bootlegged animals for laboratories, and a boycott (led by Caron) against the dissection of frogs in high school biology.

Boston and Spenser seem to be synonymous, and Robert B. Parker has brought both back in **Pastime** (Putnam, \$19.95, 223 pp). Also back is Paul Giacomini, the young boy Spenser "adopts" in *Early Autumn* who is searching for his mother, Patty. Patty has disappeared, and while she wasn't much, she was Paul's mother. So Spenser and Paul team up (with Hawk and Susan assisting) to find Patty. Along the way, the reader finds Spenser's past, a past which, in part, explains the Spenser of earlier books.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Director John Frankenheimer, who brought us classic political thrillers like *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Seven Days in May*, is at it again with **Year of the Gun**. This time the setting is Rome in 1978, which the prologue tells us is in "a state bordering revolution." The radical and violent Red Brigades have thrown Italy into chaos.

Into this tense atmosphere drops David Raybourne (Andrew McCarthy), an innocent young American writer who finds his work drawing him into a web of events he could never have imagined.

David has lived in Italy for several years and is just returning after a trip home. He's back to write, but the question is, to write about what? He earns his salary working for an English language paper, *American News*. But that could be a

cover. Only reluctantly does he admit he has a book deal—something to do with Americans and spaghetti and ten dollars a day, he insists—but he remains very secretive about it. It's this book on which the action hinges.

David's world in Italy consists of his best friend Italo Bianchi (John Pankow), a college professor, and Bianchi's cousin, David's luscious Italian girlfriend Lia (Valeria Golino).

When American gonzo photojournalist Alison King shows up to document the Red Brigades, things get more spicy and dicey for David and everyone else.

The pretty and talented Alison (Sharon Stone) believes David is working on a book about the Red Brigades, which he denies. She also discovers, through her New York contacts, that he is a one-time

American leftist who was arrested in a famous Big Apple bombing years before. She suspects David supports the Brigades and has the inside story on the terrorist group. And she wants to sign on, shooting photos for his book.

At the same time, we learn that Red Brigade members think Alison is an American agent, maybe working for the CIA. When David's unfinished manuscript falls into the wrong hands, a wild and murderous turn of events begins and rumbles along, picking up speed like an out of control train.

As many novelists do, David gets his ideas from real life. He reads the papers, he's living in Italy during a dangerous and exciting time. He writes about what he sees. When he concocts a fictional plot about the kidnapping of former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, he hits too close to home and his life is on the line.

Year of the Gun was filmed in Italy, and the rich, textured Roman scenery offers a heightened sense of reality impossible with a conventional Hollywood set. The recreations of Communist rallies and pitched battles between leftists and police or rightwing thugs are frightening. Maybe it's something about the Italian language, but crowds denouncing the government with cries of "Fascisti"

bring a chill to the spine.

The campus halls where Bianchi teaches are festooned with bold red banners and political posters—including a telling sign of Aldo Moro with a noose painted around his neck. The thick atmosphere adds to the feeling that something heavy is about to happen. And it does.

Year of the Gun is a neat-looking, well-done thriller. As for political content, it comes up a bit empty. While it doesn't explore the social or political conditions that made such a group possible, it merely allows that terrorism is a pretty dangerous and bad thing.

In the lead role, Andrew McCarthy is adequate and even shows some promise, but the former brat-packer still looks a little baby-faced. This pivotal character calls for more of a heavyweight. Unfortunately, there's a paucity of young actors who would better fill the role.

St. Louis native John Pan-kow, as Professor Italo Bianchi, is quite convincing as an Italian who always seems to have something else on his mind.

Sharon Stone goes over the top as the get-the-picture-at-all-costs photojournalist. But that's just fine.

Year of the Gun will keep you wondering, your heart racing, and your eyes on the screen.

Photo by Algimantas Kežys

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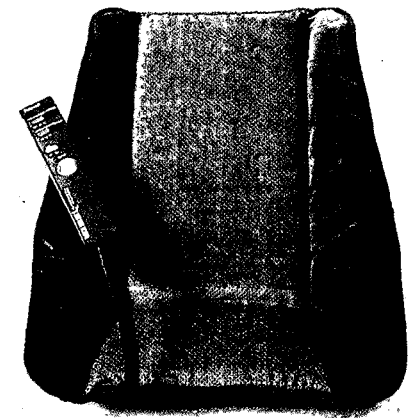
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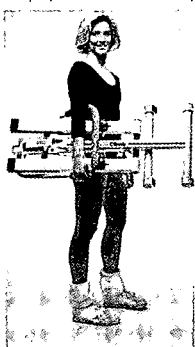
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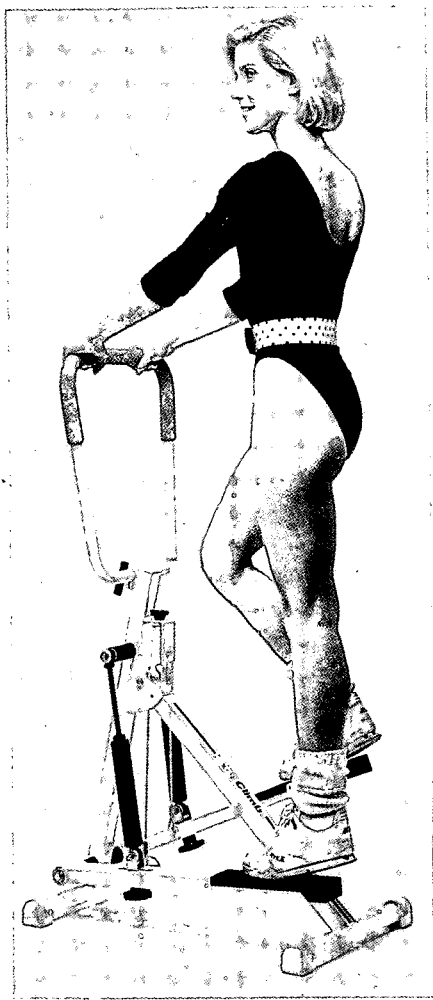
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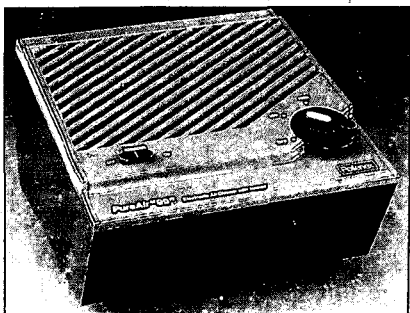
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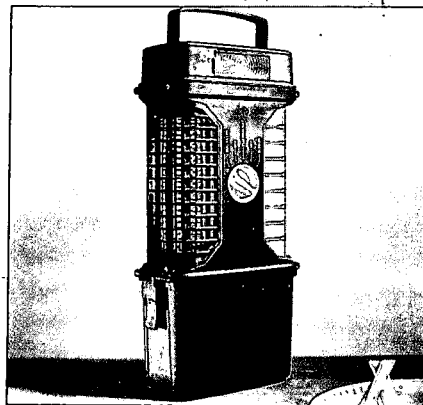
▽ FRESH AIR



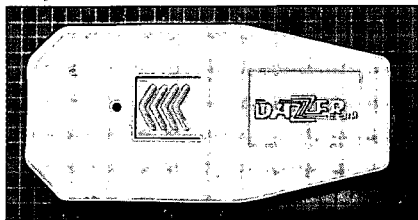
Concern about air pollution is on the rise. The Pollenex® Pure Air '99 Air Cleaner with Ionizer will help clear the air around you. A high voltage generator produces negative ions that help reduce minute particles of dust, tobacco smoke and other airborne pollutants. An electrostatic air filter intercepts larger airborne particles and has a deodorizing action too. Two speed air flow control. So now you can breathe easier with Pure Air '99. **\$69.98** (\$7.50) #A1962; 2 for **\$125.98** (\$10.00) #1962/2

▷ D-BUG LIGHT

Don't let flying pests spoil your next outdoor activity. Just bring along the D-Bug Light, electronic bug killer lantern. More than just a great bug zapper, this unit combines the zapper with a fluorescent lantern and a safety blinker. Portable and easy to carry with its own handle, the D-Bug Light is made of high impact durable plastic. Uses two 6 volt batteries (not inc.) 12 volt DC receptacle adapts to car, RV or boat battery, so its great for camping, boating, picnics, backyards. So don't let bugs spoil your outdoor fun—just "de-bug"! **\$59.98** (\$5.00) #A1964.



▽ THE DAZER™



Even the most dedicated canine aficionado can sometimes encounter unfriendly dogs. Dazer™ provides a humane way to repel their advance, emitting ultrasonic sound waves inaudible to humans and totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and other common deterrents). Pocket size (4¾" long) plastic case can also clip on belt; takes 1-9V battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bikers, seniors and kids—plus the proverbial postman. **\$29.98**, (\$3.00) #A1829X.

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